

Meditators (Book One)

The Living Dreamcatcher

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Meditators (Book One): The Living Dreamcatcher
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This work is dedicated to *3 HOURS of Best Female Vocal Dubstep Mix February 2015 Dubstep Remix 2015*, uploaded by the channel V Player.

Shoutout to the bands Eidola and Winona Fighter

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Chapter 1

The Brink of Life

THE DRIVE TO WORK was dreadful, partly because of the traffic, but mostly because I didn't want to go. I was a loss prevention officer for a discount department store, which meant my job was to stop people from stealing. But since it was a liability to accuse someone of theft, my job *really* was to stand at the front and watch my faith in humanity scramble out the door one *Follow Your Dreams* sign at a time.

On the bright side, nothing new would happen today. Nothing new happened any day. Each morning, the doors would open, and I would experience another eight hours of pain. No, not pain—boredom. Boredom was worse.

At least standing at the front gave me time to think, and as the first customers arrived, I let my mind fixate on a dream I had the night before. In it, the girl of my dreams—the *literal* girl of my dreams—was there. For months, she appeared in my sleep, observing from a distance, never daring to get close.

Until last night.

Last night, through a river of streetlamps, she approached me dead-on, and amid the golden lights, I saw her clearly for the first time. She was tall, blonde, and fiercely athletic. An ivory sundress draped over her shoulders and swept across the ground, gliding clean along the pavement. Each step toward me was deliberate. Steady. Graceful. And the closer she got, the more I sensed a warmth in her stare—a warmth that turned to fire. Inches away, she stopped, and in her presence, I forgot how to breathe.

What came next surprised me. With one more step, she placed a hand at my waist, rested her cheek against mine, and whispered—

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“Phillip? Are you okay?”

The mousy voice of my supervisor, Andy, snapped me from my reverie. He shuffled to center himself before me, and while I wasn’t exceptionally tall, I still had to look down to meet his eyes.

“You look a little lost,” Andy said, leaning against a rack of cheap shirts. He rubbed a hand through his greasy, thin hair. “What’re you thinking about?”

“Oh, I...” This wasn’t good. “I was just thinking about a dream I had last night. There was this girl in it, and...” I trailed off, but Andy beckoned me to continue. “She told me my grandpa—uh, he’s been in the hospital for two years—she told me he’d woken from his coma. And that someone was coming to kill... You know what? It was just a dream. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“No, I think it means something,” Andy said, sounding sincere.

“You do?”

“Yeah.” Andy straightened, and the rack creaked upright. “I think it means you need to *wake up*, Phillip. You clocked in late *and* missed your round. The Reebok Reaper is already here, and you haven’t moved an inch!”

My eyes returned to their half-closed state, and I sighed. “So, do you want me to actually stop the Reaper today?”

“No. I want you to watch him until he leaves.”

“And when he leaves with shoes he didn’t pay for?”

Andy looked at me like I was stupid. “Log it in the book. Obviously. Look, I’m not paying you to daydream. I’m paying you to *work*.”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll go—”

Before I could finish, my phone rang. I looked at Andy in horror, but he simply rolled his eyes and gestured for me to answer. When I saw who it was, however, I paused.

“It’s the hospital,” I said. “Can I take this outside?”

“No. You either answer in front of me or leave it for voicemail. Your call.”

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I froze. I didn't want to do this dance-monkey-dance routine today, but the idea that the girl from my dream was right—well, it was concerning when I remembered the whole of what she'd said. I had two choices: swallow my pride or bury my curiosity, and it wasn't until the fourth ring that I made up my mind.

“Hello?” I said, avoiding eye contact with Andy.

“Hi, this is Sunnyside Hospital,” a girl's voice responded. “Is this Phillip Wolfe?”

“Yes.”

“I have some news regarding your grandfather. Are you comfortable?”

A lump formed in my throat. This could go one of two ways: either Grandpa was awake, or he was dead. I braced for each path, but it was like steadying for the impact of a train or a bus. No matter which one hit, I was going to be obliterated.

“Yeah,” I lied. “Is he okay?”

“He's, uh... well... he's woken from his coma,” the girl said. “After running him through our tests, he seems to be—” she flipped through a file, “—perfectly fine, actually.”

The moment lingered as she waited for a response, but I was stunned silent. She continued.

“Despite his *very* clear wishes, it's mandatory that he stay here overnight. That said, he *is* allowed to have visitors.” The girl's voice dipped as she veered off script. “And you really should come visit. He's been asking about you since he first woke.”

“H-He has? My shift's over at...” *What am I doing?* “I'll be there in an hour.”

“Good. We'll see you then.”

There was a click, and she hung up. I held the phone to my ear an extra second before leveling my eyes with Andy. He looked at me with bemusement

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before making a show of clapping.

“Bravo, Phillip,” he said. “I’ve seen some crazy stunts from employees trying to go home early, but this one might take the cake.”

“No, but—”

“Look.” He stood straighter, emulating what a leader might look like. “I’m sure you want to go home and play video games or whatever, but we’re short-staffed today. I can’t let you leave. The store needs a loss prevention officer.” He placed a hand on my shoulder. “The store needs you.”

“Andy, you don’t understand—”

“I don’t need to understand. I’ll get in trouble if you leave early.” He softened. “Listen, I’m on your side, Phillip. Truly, I am. But you’re still late for that lap around the store. You can, *ahem*, go to the hospital...” his grubby fingers waggled air quotes, “...after your shift.”

With that, Andy walked away to attend to a customer at the jewelry counter, muttering about how teenage boys used to work so much harder back in the day. But I was twenty. I thought about shouting that after him, but it didn’t feel dignified.

Damn. Grandpa was awake, and he was just out of reach. I wanted to see him. I *needed* to see him. I’d never wanted anything more in my life, and yet, I couldn’t go. I was stuck here with—

Wait. *Was* I stuck?

My gaze drifted outside, and I found the sunlight more inviting than ever. Leaving would be easy. I could just step outside. Break the rules. Deal with the consequences. Maybe I could even—

In my moment of distraction, the Reaper bolted past, tripping over the curb as he rushed to his car. It was an embarrassing display to watch him sputter to his feet and gather the boxes that’d scattered to the winds. It was even sadder seeing him scramble at the driver’s side door with mounting anxiety. That pitiful nature was the fate of rule-breakers. No. I couldn’t live

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like that. My destiny was to log theft and do rounds.

And for the next few hours, that's what I did. Still, I was bothered by the dream girl's message. While the dream itself was starting to blur, her words remained in my mind with perfect clarity.

Your grandfather's awake.

Check. That part had come true. But the next part?

They're coming to kill you. Run.

Run? Run from who? And why were *they* coming to kill me? I was more inclined to take this girl's advice now that Grandpa was awake, but even if my dream was more than a coincidence—even if I wanted to run—I couldn't. This job earned minimum wage but losing it meant I couldn't afford rent. I was stuck, unable to leave today, tomorrow, or possibly ever.

Hour after hour passed, and each time I passed Andy, he gave me a smug grin. I dealt with it by counting down the seconds until it was time to clock out. Finally, I punched out in the back, and all that remained was the long walk across the store. I kept my eyes low, hoping not to be bothered, but Andy stopped me anyway.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" he said. "Patience is a virtue, you know."

I ignored him. What would he know about virtue?

Hot air never felt better as I stepped into the sun and sped out to my car. Once behind the wheel, I felt a squeeze in my chest. Hopefully nobody told Grandpa about my promise to be there within an hour—or that I hadn't visited in over a year.

Ugh. Has it really been that long? Early on, I'd visited every day hoping for a recovery. But daily became weekly. Weekly became monthly. And eventually, I just couldn't go anymore. Seeing Grandpa wilt away wasn't something I could stomach. I figured the coma would last forever, and that Grandpa's employers would pay for his healthcare until... well...

Until nothing. That wasn't today.

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I arrived at the hospital, lucky to have evaded the cops amid my speeding, and got a visitor's sticker from the girl at the front desk. Then I followed the hallway to the end and watched the room numbers escalate until I was outside Grandpa's door. Room 212.

There's an old idea that, when you're on the brink of death, you see your life flash before your eyes. Here, I found some proof that this also happened on the brink of life. Every memory of Grandpa came rushing to my mind. The times we fished in the pond behind our house. The nights we stayed up late to play card games. The hours of conversations about life. Two years ago, I'd accepted that our story had ended, but as I opened the door, I found myself thinking...

Maybe our story is just beginning

Chapter 2

The Promise

GRANDPA'S ROOM WAS NOT what I had expected. Curtains had been pulled from their rods, towels littered the floor, and a smattering of year-old get-well cards lay strewn about. The smell of antiseptic cleaning solution couldn't hide the stench of sweat that had seeped into the walls, and even the lights were in bad shape, with a flicker in the corner that suggested everyone in the hospital—even the maintenance men—had forgotten about this room. But for as bad as the room looked, Grandpa looked worse. He sat on a thin mattress, hooked to an IV. Between his pale skin and emaciated body, he looked like little more than a skeleton.

I closed the door, and Grandpa peered at me. His gaze lingered until recognition filled him. Then, his body inflated with life. A pink shade filled his cheeks, and he smiled, letting the wrinkles crinkle up and down his face. But it wasn't until his eyes sparkled that I finally saw him. The real him. The old him.

“Hi,” I said, struggling to find my breath.

“Phillip,” he rasped, forcing my name out of his frail vocal cords. “You're alive?” He sounded surprised.

My throat tightened, and I tried to smile.

“I know I'm late,” I said, “but did you really think I died trying to get here?”

“No, I thought—” Grandpa coughed hard into the crease of his arm. I watched him with an ache all over my body, holding my breath to stay calm. When he finished, he cleared his throat and spoke again, raspier than before. “It's good to see you.”

Unsteadily, he motioned for a handshake, and I met it. With our palms

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touching, our fingers performed the intricate dance of our secret handshake. We hadn't done it in years, but I remembered every beat. It finished with a snap—mine more forceful than his—and for the first time since my dream, I felt like everything was going to be okay.

“What happened to your room?”

“I wanted to leave,” Grandpa said. I waited for him to continue, but he refused to elaborate. Still, I said nothing and hoped the silence would coax some truth out of him. It didn't.

“How are you?” he asked, after the silence stretched too long. “It's been two years. What have you done with your life?”

“Oh, I've been, uh...” My throat clenched as the reality of my life dawned on me. I had nothing to my name. No progress. No success. No glory. Nothing. “I've been working the daily grind. You know how it is.”

“I do. I do. How's your girlfriend?”

“I don't, uh... have a girlfriend,” I said, flushing red. “Never have.”

“Oh, right.” Grandpa nodded, more pleased about this fact than I was. “Relationships at your age are too much. They just make big decisions harder. What about a job? Do you have one of those?”

“Yeah, I guess. It pays the bills, nothing more.”

“I'm proud of that.” He smiled, genuine and wide.

We spent the next hour talking as though we were old friends who'd run into one another on the street and gone out for coffee. I was delighted to find him in support of every dumb decision I ever made. I played video games for six hours every night? Good on me, I was embracing my imagination. I had no plans to attend college? No worries. I'd find another path to success. I lived moment-to-moment with nothing of value to my name? That meant I could live with no fear. I didn't understand where his optimism came from, but it was a nice change of pace from my usual self-deprecation. And by the time an hour had passed, he nearly had me believing in myself again.

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“It’s so nice to see you again,” I said after the conversation lulled. “You know, I had a dream you were going to wake up. It’s crazy that it came true.”

Grandpa, who had been smiling a moment before, sobered. “You had a dream about the future?”

“Well, no, not the future,” I said carefully. “Some dream girl told me.”

With great strain, Grandpa propped himself upright and leaned toward me. “What did she look like? The girl?”

“Blonde hair, blue eyes...” I shrugged. “My height, muscular...”

“Did she say anything else?” As he stared at me, I noticed the light in his eyes had been replaced with fire. The same fire I’d seen in the girl.

“Uh, well,” I found my breath. “She told me to run, but—”

Grandpa ripped the cords from his body and scrambled to the edge of his bed. I watched, horrified, wondering where this new energy had come from. Urgently, he moved to stand, but I held both arms wide to keep him corralled to his bedside.

“Phillip, we h-have to go.”

“Grandpa, it’s okay.”

“No, we c-can’t stay here. You need t-t-to—”

With a bang, a pair of nurses filed through the door, responding to the wailing of the machines. Grandpa’s eyes darted between the nurses and the door, a wild consideration floating through his mind. He tensed and focused, retreating deep into his mind. For a moment, he looked like a warrior, primed for battle. His hand lifted. The room stilled.

But nothing happened.

Whatever he’d expected to happen didn’t. After a beat, Grandpa chuckled. The vibrancy in his body seeped away, and the skeletal husk of my grandfather returned to the bed of his own volition. There, he fixed his gaze on the far wall as the nurses reattached his wires. The process was so efficient I was sure this wasn’t the first time this had happened. In fact, it was so smooth

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I'd bet this wasn't the second or third time either. Finally, the nurses left, and Grandpa stared until the door was properly shut. Then, he turned to me.

"Phillip, listen closely." He wrapped his ice-cold hands around mine. "Someone is going to come to you in your dreams tonight. This person is going to ask you where I am. You can't tell them I'm here."

"What?"

"You can't tell them I'm here." He squeezed, surprisingly strong. "I need you to promise."

"What are you—"

"Promise me, Phillip. My life depends on it."

"Okay. Fine. I promise."

"Good." Grandpa loosened his grip and closed his eyes, a new pain shooting through him. "Now, if you keep this promise, they'll kill you."

"What?"

"*They'll kill you.*" He looked me head-on. "That means your only chance to keep your promise—and your life—is to go somewhere safe. Do you understand?"

I stared at Grandpa sadly. He was serious, and that meant only one thing. He'd gone crazy. Lost his mind.

"Yeah, I get it," I said, playing along simply to appease him. "Where should I go?"

"Pen and paper," he requested.

I pulled the supplies from a table drawer, finding them under some strange inhaler labeled as *Mela*, and handed them over. Grandpa scrawled. When he finished, he shoved the paper into my chest. I scanned it, deciphering the name '*Theodore*' alongside the address of an old antique shop we used to frequent.

"Go," he said.

"Okay, but—"

"*Go!*"

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His tone was too much to bear, and Grandpa's voice gave out. He coughed into his elbow, and with each hack, a splatter of blood bloomed on the sleeve of his gown. Afraid, I stayed motionless, not sure what I could do to help. The fit ended on its own, and Grandpa drew a series of breaths to return to baseline.

"I'll go," I lied. "But if you need anything—anything at all—please call."

I plucked the pen from his hands and wrote my phone number on a strip of paper, then stuffed it into his open palm. He clutched my number tight and nodded, saying nothing more. And so, it was with a sad sense of defeat that I gave him a hug, whispered goodbye, and left.

That night, I lay in bed and stared at the ceiling as the hours waned. My mind buzzed with the warnings of the day, and the theme of their messages didn't escape me.

Run.

But the thought of going to a random antique shop and explaining to the clerk that my recently awoken grandfather told me to meet with some random guy because I had a dream about a girl? It was a horrifying prospect. Besides, it was possible the shop had closed.

Still, the cogs in my mind churned, and the process of falling asleep was like trying to pry my fingers from a finger trap; the more I wanted it, the harder it became. Was I supposed to count sheep? Close my eyes and wait? Put a pillow over my head until I passed out? How could I get my brain to stop?

Ironically, the more I considered these questions, the more my mind pulled me under. And after teetering on the edge of sleep for the entire night, I finally slipped away into a dream.



Chapter 3

Mal

I STOOD BAREFOOT ON the shoreline of an infinite ocean. A wave crashed and washed over my feet, cresting high upon the beach. As the swell reached its peak, it suspended the hair on my legs, and for a moment, I felt like I was floating.

When the water retreated, my attention was pulled toward the horizon where I found a pod of dolphins flying—actually flying—above the water, jostling and playing as though gravity didn't apply to them. Nothing inside me questioned how this was possible. I accepted this dream as reality as easily as I drew my next breath of air. And in that breath, I tasted something earthy. Was it pine? Oak? Fir? I turned to find a sprawling tapestry of flora and fauna. Squirrels scurried across the grass, birds hopped from branch to branch, and a steady stream gave life to everything it touched.

I traced the edge of the forest, scanning the trees higher and higher until I found their canopy. And before I knew it, I was lost in the late-sunset sky. Somehow, a thousand colors had spread across the firmament. Where one color ended and another began, I had no idea, but the mural transfixed me for—I don't know how long.

Eventually, however, the colors faded, and all that remained was a navy twilight shimmer. It was from this heavenly blanket that a million stars stirred to life, moving freely like fireflies in the night. They swung left and right, flowing together as living constellations. In one corner of the sky, the starry image of a bull charged. On the other end, a matador waited, dangling a cloak of light. And when the two collided, they burst apart like fireworks and scattered over the horizon, spurring a star-storm across the universe. I was

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enthralled for seconds, or minutes, or hours until—

It stopped.

Without warning, the stars froze, the dolphins submerged, and the magic dissipated. Now, jagged shells stabbed my feet, icy wind grated my sides, and flaky sand pricked my legs.

Snaaap!

Somewhere far away, a violent tearing split the air. I looked back at the forest, finding the atmosphere thicker and more ominous than before. The leaves hung sullen on their branches, and a dark shade obscured the previously statuesque tree trunks. There was a silence that felt more like a compositional rest note—a promise there was more to come.

Thump.

The next sound came with such intensity that I felt its vibrations ripple over my skin. Something gargantuan had dropped deep in the forest. I squinted, but there was nothing past the outer foliage. Just darkness. Silence.

Snap.

A pause.

Thump.

Whatever whimsy the world held vanished. I didn't know what was causing the noise, but a little voice in my head screamed at me, echoing the words of the girl.

Your grandfather's awake.

Snap.

They're coming to kill you.

Thump.

Run.

By now, my eyes had adjusted to the darkness, and at the edge of the forest, a tree started to bend. There was a tight creaking noise, an uncomfortable moment of silence, and a harsh ***snap*** as the trunk cracked in

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half. Then the tree **thumped** into the ground. In the liminal space where the tree used to be, a silhouette emerged. A person.

Adrenaline poured through me, but without a fight-or-flight instinct, I could only freeze. The person was unlike any I'd ever seen. They were cloaked by a perpetual shade, unbroken even by moonlight, and their movement was smooth and unsettling—something I could only describe as a slither. All of a sudden, I felt like a rodent in a cage with a snake.

The predator moved until they were an arm's length away, then stopped. "Hello, Phillip."

A feminine voice sounded from behind the veil. She sounded gleeful, even playful, and I was caught off guard by the tone. I opened my mouth to introduce myself.

"Hell—"

The shadow lashed out, snapping her hand around my neck. A sharp pain rushed through me as my feet left the ground and my skin broke against her claw-like fingernails. Blood dripped down my jugular, and she eyed it with a sheen of lust.

"There'll be more of that," she whispered. "I promise."

From a foot off the ground, I could now see the details of her body—or at least the details she left exposed. She had a slender face and a crooked nose with sharp cheekbones and bitter eyes. Black pigtailed rested on her shoulders. It was only in the lines of her tired expression that I found any indication of her age. She was older—fifty at least. A dreamcatcher tattoo was etched into her wrist. It featured a dragon perched around the rim with two feathers stretching down her forearm. As I eyed it, the woman smirked as though the symbol was supposed to tell me something.

"Who... are... you...?" I asked.

The woman said nothing. Instead, she shifted her hips and shoved me into the sand. I skidded across the surface until friction slowed me. Dazed, I

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stumbled back to my feet. My pace quickened, though, when I realized the woman was marching closer.

By the time I found my footing, she had arrived. She slashed her nails across the side of my face, leaving a trio of cuts on my cheek. I recoiled, and she used that opportunity to shove me back to the ground, nearly cracking my spine with the force of the impact. There, the woman placed her feet atop my wrists to restrain me and opened her hand, pouring sand out of her fist like an hourglass counting seconds of my life. The powder dribbled down my forehead and buried itself into my cuts. I grunted and clenched my teeth.

The woman stepped off and let me roll in agony. I struggled to wipe my face, but the blood on my hands only clumped the dirt I was trying to sweep away.

Another swift kick sent me hurtling toward the shoreline, and I rolled into the next wave. There, the ocean thrashed me, spinning me round and around before spitting me back onto shore with all the grace of a bouncer removing a drunk from a bar. The water—now pink with blood—had carried enough muck away that my vision returned.

There was a moment of hesitation as I decided what to do next. I needed to run, but my legs felt like cement. I needed to fight, but my arms felt like noodles. There was only one thing I could do. Bravely, I fell to my knees, wrapped my arms around my legs, and begged for mercy.

“Please stop. Don’t hurt me. Just go away.”

The woman stopped moving. Her mouth gaped, and she looked horrified.

“You can’t be serious,” she said, her voice caught somewhere between disbelief and suspicion. “You *are* joking, aren’t you?”

“P-Please. Please d-don’t kill me.”

She scoffed. “Is this really what’s become of the Wolfe family?”

I looked up, hoping my bleary face would inspire mercy. The woman studied me for a long moment, weighing my life on a scale. Then, the scales

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tipped. An ethereal shimmer flashed around her hand, and a thin knife appeared in her grasp as if conjured from another dimension. Like lightning, she plunged the blade through my stomach.

Every muscle in my body contracted. I'd never been in a fight before, let alone stabbed, but the pain was so much worse than I could have ever imagined. Finally, I screamed. It was the kind of scream that rips your throat. The kind that burns your own ears. The kind you make when you know you're going to die.

The monster let out a satisfied, almost sensual breath before withdrawing the knife and shunting me over. Sand licked the new hole in my body, and ocean salt magnified the pain. The agony overwhelmed me, and my nervous system sparked ablaze.

“Now that you know my power, we can get to it,” she said, her tone changing to something more professional. “I have one question, and if you can't answer it, I'll kill you. Do you understand?”

This was a dream. Could she really kill me? Was I really going to take that chance?

“Y-Yes.” My voice was so broken it was almost impossible to hear.

“Great,” she said. “How did your grandfather wake from his coma?”

It was such a simple question—so simple I felt angry she put me through all this pain before asking. But as my mouth opened to answer, I realized I didn't know the answer.

“I-I... don't... k-know,” I sputtered between breaths. Blood filled my throat, and I choked.

The woman studied me. I expected her to lash out again, but instead, she nodded.

“Where can I find him, then?”

My eyes shot open, and the answer burned in my mind. *The hospital. Sunnyside. Room 212.*

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“I-I don’t know,” I said again, trying to match the rhythm of my last response. But my bluff wasn’t good enough, and the woman smiled viciously.

“You know where he is, and I’m going to get it out of you no matter how much pain it takes.” She conjured a can of gasoline. “What’ll it be, Phillip?”

I stared at her, stunned by the rush of violence. My mouth opened, and the demon’s eyes glimmered with hope, but my words were disappointing.

“Who *are* you?”

The woman looked at me in shock, giving me too much credit for what might’ve been interpreted as defiance. Her expression transitioned to disgust, and with an angry tilt, she poured the gasoline over my body.

“I am Mal, the leader of the Night Corps. Now, answer me or die.”

She shook the last few drops of gas into my mouth and stomped on my stomach, forcing me to choke on the gas. As I struggled to cough, Mal bent over to straddle my body. With one hand, she gripped my jaw, forcing me to meet her gaze. Between us, her free hand raised into view, exposing a lit match between her forefinger and thumb.

“Where is your grandfather?” she asked.

I stayed silent. I couldn’t tell her. He’d made me promise.

She moved the fire closer to my cheek. Fuel bubbled on my skin.

“Where. Is. Henry. Wolfe?”

I shook my head, and the match moved closer. A single flame snapped to life on the side of my face. I tried to scream, but nothing came out. Mal let the fire dig into my skin before whipping me with the blunt side of her hand. This extinguished the flame, but it made my body go limp.

Mal latched onto my jaw again. “This is your last chance.”

The tattoo on her wrist seemed much more prominent now, and the ridges seared themselves into the folds of my brain. In the light of the fire, the dragon moved like it was breathing, and now, I understood what it meant.

It meant I was fucked.

Chapter 4

The Briar

I CLOSED MY EYES and cried. I couldn't do this any longer. There was only one way I was going to leave with my life, and it would be by breaking my promise.

"Grandpa's at—" I coughed.

Mal leaned closer, and the blood in my throat dried up.

"He's at S—"

Bang!

The sound split the air and my whole body seized. For a moment, I thought Mal had ignited the rest of the fuel, but when I felt no fire, I searched for what had changed. Above me, Mal was clutching her chest, her expression replaced by confusion and rage. Blood seeped through the cracks of her fingers, dripping onto my face, and I squirmed beneath her. As she adjusted, I realized what happened.

She'd been shot.

Her neck craned toward the forest, and she locked eyes with whoever had attacked her. There was the mark of recognition in her eyes followed by a flash of fear. In moments, she collected herself and stood, removing the pressure from my chest. A spark of light flashed by her fist, and a gun formed at her side. Then she launched herself forward at an impossible speed.

My eyes trailed her until she was at the edge of my vision, but I was in too much pain to track any further. Slowly, my gaze wavered back toward the motionless stars in the sky, and I waited for death to finish me off. Somewhere near the forest, a scuffle broke out, and flashes of light pulsed overhead. But I noticed it less as more blood seeped out of me. Darkness started to take hold

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of my body. I was a candle at the end of its wick, seconds from being extinguished.

In my final moments, I had expected to feel happiness or warmth, but instead, I felt nothing. The world simply faded...

...

...

... But I didn't die. Somehow, I was alive. I knew I was alive because I could feel *everything*. The gruesome pain of my wounds, the wild discomfort of the sand, and the unbearable chill of death; I felt it all—even the woman who was kneeling over my chest.

I snapped back in a panic, expecting to be under the weight of Mal. But it wasn't her. Instead, a new woman was crouched overhead. A black cloth covered her face, and a few strands of blood-stained hair peeked out from beneath her hood. She was strangely comforting to look at—at least until she lifted her gaze to meet mine. There, in the depths of her eyes, I recognized a rare kind of sorrow. A distant despair.

As fast as she'd made eye contact, she looked away and shifted her focus to the gash in my stomach. A strange energy surged through me, bringing me back from the edge of death. Where she looked, my skin worked to sew itself together, prickling as though it was being stabbed in reverse.

I looked over my savior and noticed a patch of blood blooming across her abdomen, staining the golden emblem on her chest.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"The endpoint's coming soon," she said, glancing to the heavens. "When it's here, we'll both be okay."

I followed her gaze and found the stars disappearing one-by-one.

"You're lucky I found you," the girl said. She adjusted her left shoulder, and a chunk of it was missing. I stared at it until my own shoulder burned with pain. With a flinch, I looked away.

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“I’m lucky I was found too,” the girl tacked on.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“I’m the Briar.”

I wasn’t sure if this was a name or a title. “Why did you save me?”

The Briar cocked her head and narrowed her eyes.

“Because you needed to be saved.”

By now, the endpoint had arrived. The seams of it encircled us, pulling our bodies away like a fine mist. It felt peaceful. Like the space between life and death. The void between worlds. The gap between moments in time. I could barely whisper “thank you” before the darkness swept us away.



I jolted awake. My first instinct was to reach for my wounds, but there was nothing there. There were no burn marks on my skin. No rasp in my throat. No hole in my gut. All those injuries had been left behind in the dream.

The dream...

It was unlike any dream I’d ever had, but it was still just a dream. Right? It was a dream that felt... real? But it wasn’t real. It couldn’t be. I stared up at the ceiling and waited for the dream to fade, but it didn’t. Instead, my mind filled with the echo of a memory.

They’re coming to kill you. Run.

My hands fumbled to pick my phone off the bedside table, and with adrenaline still pumping through my system, it was a miracle I could steady myself enough to dial anyone, let alone the hospital. I punched in the number but didn’t send the call. Instead, I stared at the screen vacantly and listened to my breath.

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Was this actually happening? Or was it possible that I'd lost my mind? If I made this call, I had to accept that the reality I once knew as true was only half the story. I'd have to come to terms with the idea that there was a secret world of people who could attack me—possibly kill me—in any given dream. There was no chance of that, right?

The first words Grandpa spoke to me came roaring back. *Phillip, you're alive?* He was genuinely surprised—which meant he'd been expecting something to happen. It meant he knew something about this.

I hit the green button and waited as the phone rang twice.

"Hi," I started. "I was hoping to talk to Henry Wolfe. Is he still there?"

"Oh, great timing. He's checking out right now," the clerk said. "I'll put him on the line."

The line went dead for a moment before Grandpa picked up.

"Phillip," Grandpa's voice was panicked. "Did you make it to Mandala?"

I stayed quiet, not sure how to answer.

"Did you meet Theodore?" Grandpa asked more urgently.

"I... uh..."

"Mal?" Grandpa asked.

In a single word, Grandpa confirmed everything. The dream, the pain, the torture—it had all been real.

"Yes," I whispered.

"You need to run," Grandpa said. "Mandala will protect you; I swear it."

"But you gave me the address to an antique shop," I protested. "That's not—"

"Just go!" He paused. "And I'm sorry."

There was a click. He'd hung up. I stayed still, listening to the silence for a long minute. A part of me still believed the last day of my life had been a dream in and of itself, but the rational part of me knew this wasn't true. That part of me knew that if I fell asleep again, I would die.

Chapter 5

Mandala

AMID MY DAZED BEWILDERMENT, I wasn't entirely sure how I got to the antique store, but what I found there was disappointing. The whole building was a dilapidated relic of a time before the city's gentrification. Its walls were rotting, the gutters were rusting, and a slab of graffiti-ridden wood had replaced the front door. The only indication that the building hadn't been abandoned years ago was a half-broken sign that flashed part of the word *Open*.

I reconsidered going inside, but I couldn't shake the thought of Mal torturing me again. She'd be back, I knew. And so, with a mixture of courage and fear, I strode toward the decrepit storefront and pushed through the shoddy entrance. The door chimed as I entered, and I shuffled nervously into the foyer, careful not to disturb the fragile trinkets and dusty furniture surrounding me.

"Can I help you?" an elderly shopkeeper spoke up from the counter.

I jumped in shock, and after a nervous chuckle, I nodded.

"Yes, I'm here for, uh, Theodore...?" My sentence trailed away, but I relaxed as the old man's face lit up.

"Absolutely. Wait here."

Before I could thank him, the old man disappeared behind the counter, past a door marked RESTRICTED ACCESS, and I waited until he returned with someone new. This new man was middle-aged and wore a suit and tie—which was wildly out of place in this dingy shop. The white streaks in his otherwise dark hair added to his confident flair. Despite that, he carried himself with enough youthful vigor to make you believe he could belong anywhere.

"Phillip! You've arrived!" The middle-aged man reached for a

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handshake.

His words were remarkably casual, as though this meeting were nothing more than a mundane happenstance and not the culmination of increasingly unlikely circumstances. I shook his hand and tried to mutter a casual ‘hello’, but my voice was stuck in my throat.

“My name is Theodore Wilson. I’m the Director of Operations for the Mandala Defense Agency. It’s nice to see you again.”

I stared at him blankly.

“Now, I can see by your expression that you have questions, and I know what you’re wondering. Why have I come to greet you in person? Right?”

Wrong.

“See,” he continued, “I don’t usually greet the new recruits, but I *had* to make an exception for a Wolfe. You know, we’ve been waiting for you to join our ranks since you were, ohhh... this tall?” He lowered his hand to toddler-size.

I had no idea what he was talking about. I looked uncomfortably to the shopkeeper for moral support, but the old man nodded enthusiastically, agreeing with his manager.

“Uh, Mr. Theodore—” I started.

“Please, call me Teddy.”

“Okay. Teddy. I think there might be a mistake. Isn’t this an antique store?”

“Well, of course it is, *ha*. Buy a knick-knack while you’re here, won’t you?” Teddy stepped away toward the back room. “Come on, kiddo, let’s get you checked in.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, digging my feet into the ground. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve never heard of Mandala, and I don’t believe we’ve ever met.”

Teddy stopped and glanced at the clerk with uncertainty. His gaze

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returned to me, and he traced the outline of my body until, finally, he beamed a smile.

“Ah, you almost got me, Phillip. You’re a jokester, just like your father. Come on, now. There’s no time to waste. Let’s get you tested and enrolled.”

I forced a smile out of politeness, but my eyes conveyed no sense of warmth. He didn’t get it, and I didn’t like the way he was talking about my family. I’d never heard of him before yesterday, so they couldn’t have been *that* close, right?

“Come on,” Teddy beckoned again, pushing open the RESTRICTED ACCESS door. There, he leaned back and gestured for me to enter.

I peered past him to see what was waiting for me. While the interior of the antique store was made of old wood and rusted bolts, the area behind Teddy was all-white and brightly lit. It was a single hallway, and at the end, an armed security guard stood protecting an elevator.

Pressured, I took a step forward. Out of curiosity, I took another. And finally, out of instinct, I pushed past the threshold and entered Mandala. I wasn’t going to let Mal kill me, and if Grandpa promised I’d be safe here, I had to believe him.

Behind me, Teddy flashed his badge over my shoulder and the guard stepped aside.

“So, Phillip,” Teddy started, pressing the elevator’s call button. “We’ve been waiting for you to come see us ever since your grandfather fell into that coma. We waited a month, and then a year, and then longer. After a while, I didn’t think you were ever going to arrive, even after the precognitive dreams rolled in. Ridiculous, right?”

I got the sense he was making a joke, but I didn’t understand it.

“Anyway, I think it’s amazing that your grandfather’s woken,” Teddy continued. “Is there any chance he’ll stop by for a visit?”

I shrugged, not at all sure what Grandpa’s plan was.

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“That’s okay,” Teddy said, disappointed. “Do you at least know where he’s staying?”

“He’s at—” I wanted to say the hospital, but it was no longer true. “I don’t know. He didn’t tell me.”

There was a chime, and the silver doors of the elevator opened. We stepped inside and I posted up against the back railing. There were several buttons embedded into the panel that each corresponded to one of the building’s four major levels. Theodore pressed the Level One button—then another button beside it—and placed his card into a small slot. A moment later, the lift stuttered, and we began our descent underground.

“You know, Phillip, there’s going to be quite a buzz around you,” Teddy said. “Your legacy here is second-to-none. The son of Hubert Wolfe; the grandson of Henry Wolfe. And then there’s your mother, Cassandra, who changed our precognitive program forever. Tragic what happened to her.”

Frustration flashed through me. “How do you know my family?” The question came out harsher than I intended, but I was tired of him talking about them like they were his best friends.

“They were my best friends,” Teddy said. For a moment, he looked heartbroken. With a glance toward the ground and a moment of pause, he softened. “I trusted them with my life, and that trust was repaid many times over.” He looked me dead in the eyes. “Did your family *really* never talk to you about Mandala?”

I shook my head.

“So, you’re not aware of coalescence?”

“No.”

“Or precognitors?”

“No...”

“Or alpha waves?” he asked, desperate and incredulous.

I lowered my gaze, and Teddy nodded.

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“Well, I was hoping to pair you with a mentor right away, but I’ll have to reassess that plan. In any case...” The elevator stopped. “Welcome to Mandala.”

The doors opened to a massive underground base. Altogether, Level One had four floors, and I was on the topmost part. The building was spacious, but not too busy, and my eyes swept over everything. Among all the bland doors and hallways, there wasn’t much of interest save for a large dreamcatcher mural on the bottommost floor. The web of the dreamcatcher featured a compass rose at its center, with three feathers stretching down the outer rim. Ignoring the hairline fracture that ran across the middle of the tiling, it was a beautiful piece of art.

“Now, Level One is where you can take care of your day-to-day activities. It has everything you need—a commissary, barracks, classrooms, a library, a gym—everything.”

“Is this it?” I asked, casuallywhelmed by an otherwise ordinary campus.

“Is this it?!” Teddy chided. “We’re a quarter mile underground. The logistics of getting water, air, and concrete this deep would melt your brain. And it goes even deeper, too.”

“How deep?”

“There are four levels in total, but you’ll probably only ever see two of them.” Teddy took a step down the hall, guiding me away from the elevator. He marched a few steps farther before stopping at a door that had his name embedded in the panel. “This is my office. Come in.”

I stepped inside the room. One side was normal, with a desk and a computer crammed against the wall. The other side was odd, with a pair of cots jumbled up beside one another. Teddy gestured to a chair and took his seat by the computer.

“Since your parents never told you about us, you probably have some questions. Now’s a good time to ask them.”

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“Okay.” I didn’t know what I didn’t know; how was I supposed to ask a good question? “What does Mandala do?”

“Mandala is a top-secret defense agency. We work with the government and a handful of private investors to protect clients from nocturnal assassination and lucid exploitation.”

I stared blankly.

“In other words,” Teddy continued, “we stop terrorists who kill through dreams. We are living dreamcatchers.”

“I’m sorry, did you say terrorists? In dreams?”

“You don’t need to understand everything today. If you’re accepted into our institution, you’ll be enrolled in Coalescence Basics with Professor Young. He’ll make sure you learn everything you need to know.”

“Accepted? Is there an admittance test or something?”

“Sort of,” Teddy said. “You need to prove that you’re a coalescent or a precognitor.”

“A what or a what?”

Each time I opened my mouth, I noticed the disappointment in Teddy’s face growing more pronounced. Politely, though, he adjusted his expression and walked me through it.

“Precognitors are dreamers of the future. Their testing process is long and arduous, so we’re going to cut to the chase and assume you’re not one of those. You don’t dream about the future, do you?”

“No,” I responded flatly, “of course not.”

Nobody can, right?

“Good. Then we only need to test you for coalescence. Coalescents are people who can share dreams. Now, to administer the test, we’ll have to be assisted by someone who isn’t a coalescent. One of the new precognitors checked in today and she’ll fit the bill. I’ll get her right up.”

Teddy leaned forward and pressed a switch on his intercom system.

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“Mrs. Delphi, can you please send Phoebe up to my office? She’s needed for a coalescence test.”

After a long pause, a voice responded through the speakers. “It’s *Doctor Delphi*,” the lady replied dryly. “And yes, I’ll send her along.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Delphi,” Teddy replied. “Now Phillip, why don’t you move to one of the cots?”

I nodded uncomfortably. I wanted to ask more questions, but I felt I’d asked too many already, and by the time I worked up enough courage to bother Teddy again, Phoebe walked in. She was around my age, with auburn hair and dark eyes. My eyes lingered on her a little longer than they should have, and I looked away the second she glanced in my direction.

Teddy stood to greet the new guest. “Thanks for making time for us. This is Phillip. We’re testing him for coalescence and could use your help.”

“Of course,” Phoebe replied sweetly. “What do you need me to do?”

“All you need to do is lie down in one of those cots and fall asleep.”

“You actually want me to sleep at work?” Phoebe smiled. “This is going to be the best job ever.”

Teddy chuckled, and I laughed nervously alongside him. It was probably a little too loud. And a little too long. And a little too off-rhythm. And...

Get it together, Phillip.

“Hi,” Phoebe said, moving toward an adjacent cot. She reached over to shake my hand. “I’m Phoebe.”

“Hello,” I said, showing my teeth unnaturally as I touched the skin on her hand. I should’ve let go right away, but I held on until it was uncomfortable for everyone. Then, I withdrew my hand. Quickly. Forcefully. Awkwardly. Luckily, Phoebe didn’t bring attention to my behavior. She seemed to understand how uncomfortable I was.

“Shall we begin?” Teddy asked.

“Yeah,” I blurted.

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“Great. Now, if everything goes well, you two are going to share a dream. Upon waking, you’ll each compare details of the dream with one another. If you share the same details, we can conclude that Phillip is a coalescent. Now, do either of you need help falling asleep?”

“I could use something,” I piped up.

“Okay. Would you like *Rock-a-Bye Baby* or *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*?”

I stared at Teddy until he burst out laughing.

“I’m kidding, of course. We have much more efficient ways of falling asleep.”

He strolled over to the thermostat and, after dialing in a few numbers, a wispy gas blew into the room through the vents. As this happened, Teddy withdrew a small mask from his desk and placed it over his nose and mouth.

“This stuff is called mela gas,” Teddy said. “I’d tell you what it does, but you won’t be awake long enough to hear me out.”

The gas hit Phoebe first, and she went from wide awake to gently snoring in a matter of seconds. It was another moment or two before I inhaled my first tendril of the gas. It filled me, expanding from my feet to my brain. The whole thing made me feel light and airy until my eyes closed. A flood of panic spread through my system as I remembered the last time I fell asleep. Then, it didn’t matter. I couldn’t fight it, and I passed out.



Chapter 6

Sandstorm

AN INTENSE WAVE OF heat rolled over me. I was in the middle of a desert atop a dune, completely exposed to the elements. Though I was dreaming, the world felt very real, and as the gusting wind carried sand through the air, I felt the sting of a thousand tiny nicks slamming against my skin. The image of Mal on the beach flashed through my mind, and I forced myself to put it aside. Instinctively, I knew the sandstorm was just starting to brew, and I needed to find shelter.

I scanned the barren wasteland, looking for cover, but there was nothing nearby. No water, no shelter, no people—nothing. I was alone.

Alone. That sinking, familiar feeling of isolation chipped away at my psyche. The feeling was worse this time because being alone meant I had failed my test. It meant I wasn't special.

So, what now?

The sand continued to bite, so I pulled my shirt up over my mouth and shuffled down the side of the dune. The dirt was loose and unstable as I stepped, which forced me to tread carefully. *Perhaps if I move slowly enough—*

The sand shifted. I tumbled. My body skidded across the harsh surface, only stopping once I reached the bottom of the slope. The final impact knocked the breath out of me, and I lay still, wheezing hot, dry air without relief.

With my back to the ground, I watched pockets of sand flick above me, snapping about with ever-increasing ferocity. It took a while to gain the relief of a deep breath, but amid the threat of being flayed alive by a billion tiny rocks, I knew I had to move before I was ready. Grudgingly, I rolled onto my stomach and pressed my palms against the sandstone. Touching the ground

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was like pressing down on a stove, and I let out a low growl as I forced myself up.

This was going *swimmingly*.

I picked a direction and started walking, wandering aimlessly in the hopes that I'd stumble across an oasis. With each step, my legs grew heavier and my spirit depleted. Desperately, I scoured the terrain, but it was hard to see anything through the blanket of dirt. Worse, the rippling waves of heat distorted my vision and obscured the landscape in a haze.

I flirted with the idea of succumbing to the desert and waiting for the dream to end when a shadow materialized on the horizon. My eyes narrowed, and my heart lurched halfway up my neck as I realized the shadow was the entrance to a cave. It was distant, but not too far away. I could make it.

With renewed vigor, I scrambled toward the cave, limping across the wasteland while the storm surged behind me. The closer I got, the faster the wind blew, and I quickened my pace. Suddenly, the world went dark as the storm mounted thick enough to cast a shade over my body.

I pushed forward still, slogging through the thin sand like it was ankle-deep water. My legs begged me to stop, but I couldn't. My lungs cried out for help, but I ignored it. My mind pleaded to quit, but I wasn't going to let myself die. If Mal couldn't do me in, a stupid sandstorm wasn't going to be my end. All that mattered was the next step. So long as there was a next step, I'd reach safety.

The storm began to bear down on me, threatening to fold over my head like a tidal wave. In the blink of an eye, the world grew beige, and I was running blind. If I didn't find that cave—

The entrance sprang up out of nowhere. I sprinted harder, but my deep breath forced hot sand down my throat where it seared my lungs. A vortex swirled around me, and I had to lean against the wind to stay straight. The dust was now so thick that I couldn't see the shadow of the cave's mouth. I guessed

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it was three steps away... two steps... one step—I slipped on fresh rock and was sent scrambling into the cave on all fours. My knees scraped against the jagged rocks as the storm sealed the entrance behind me, and a wave of pain washed over me. This was followed by a swell of relief.

I was safe.

I cursed to myself and collapsed, pressing my cheek against the cold stone beneath me. I lay there for many minutes, recovering from another brush with death. The less I tensed, the more revitalized I felt, and the more my senses tuned to the world. Soon, my ears had fully adjusted, and I heard a gentle patter of water coming from deeper in the cave.

I *needed* it.

My knees ached as I hobbled to my feet. Not far away, I found fresh water running down a stalactite and dripping into a puddle. There, I fell to my knees and cupped the water into my mouth, guzzling it as though it were about to spoil. Once satiated, I cupped another handful and dumped it over my wounds. The sand washed away with ease, causing the blood to flow harder. Even though I knew I was dreaming, I was still worried about—

Something touched my leg.

I kicked and scrambled to the back wall.

“Get away! Get away!”

“Ow! Cool it, would you?” Phoebe’s soft voice echoed, and I relaxed.

“Sorry,” I said. “I thought you were...” My voice trailed away as the implication of her presence hit me. “Does this mean...?”

The realization hit Phoebe too, and she matched my grin. “It means you passed! Congratulations!”

For the first time ever, I was special.

“Now, uh... do you mind if I get some water?” Phoebe asked, gesturing to the muddy puddle behind me. “Please?”

“Oh. Sure.”

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Phoebe pushed past me and dug her hands into the water. After a long sip, she turned to look me over, and as her vision adjusted to the darkness, her eyes widened with concern.

“Are you okay?” she asked, pointing at the gash on my knee. “You look hurt.”

“It’s just a few scratches,” I said, downplaying the way it burned. “I’ll be alright.”

“If you say s—” Phoebe drew in a sharp breath and winced. “Ow!”

“Are *you* okay?” I asked, pointing out a fresh gash on her knee.

“Yeah, I just...” Phoebe looked over the wound, confused. “I guess I scraped my knee against something.” She brushed it with her finger and examined the blood. “Huh. I’ll be fine.”

As Phoebe cleaned her wound, I stared at her. Back in Teddy’s office, I’d stared with petty lust, but now, I gazed at her as though she validated my entire existence. Just by being here, she proved I was special.

“So,” I started awkwardly, “looks like we’re stuck here until the storm ends.”

“Looks like it. I’m not worried, though. I’ve had some crazy dreams before; this one’s no different.”

“We didn’t really get a chance to talk earlier, did we? Where are you from?” It was a boring question, but it was the only one I could think of.

“Originally here,” she said. “A few years ago, my family moved to California, but now I’m back. What about you?”

“I was born and raised here,” I said. “California, though? What was that like?”

The conversation kept on like this, and I learned a lot about her. She was nineteen years old with two younger sisters: Sophie and Katelyn. Apparently, she was here as a precognitor, and while I didn’t truly believe people could dream the future, I managed to keep that opinion to myself. Instead, I asked

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how Mandala found out about her. As it turned out, she'd caught their eye as a child, and they'd been collecting her prophecies for years. After some of them came true (by coincidence, I was sure), she was offered a position. She resisted at the request of her mother but reconsidered after her prophecies became more frequent and serious in nature.

Soon, the conversation evolved, and she started asking about me and my life. Unfortunately, my story was much less interesting. She asked what hobbies I had, and I shrugged. What sports did I play? None. What were my goals? I didn't know. Honestly, for as much as I wanted to get my life together, I'd never thought about where it was heading. Because of this, I tried desperately to keep the conversation on her.

Every so often, we'd check the condition of the weather outside. The storm churned for a half-hour before the last flecks of sand fluttered to the ground on the tendrils of a dying wind. And at last, the world returned to its peace. Now that the sand was evenly spread, the world looked like a painting.

Phoebe peered outside and took a step out into the sun.

"I think we should stay here until the dream ends," I said.

"I agree." Despite her words, she took another step. "Sorry, I could just use a breath and—" She rubbed her forehead, "—and I heard that shared dreams can be dangerous... so it's probably good to... uh... stay... and..."

She collapsed.

Chapter 7

The God of Death

“PHOEBE?”

She didn’t move.

“Phoebe?!”

I pressed my fingers to her neck. She had a pulse, but I had no idea what to do next. Gently, I rocked her back and forth, trying to wake her.

It was a few seconds before she finally opened her eyes. Her pupils were dilated, her irises were pale, and she stared straight through me. Her entire demeanor had changed from lively and sweet to empty and serious. It was as though the girl who collapsed and the girl who woke were two different people.

Mechanically, Phoebe dragged herself to her feet and marched out the cave. I hesitated, then sped after her.

As I trudged, every discomfort came gushing back, from the sting of my sweat to the burn of the sun to the rub of the sand—it all struck at once. These sweltering conditions made me miserable, but Phoebe remained unfazed. She walked at a steady pace, not showing any signs of exhaustion. My eyes trailed after her with envy as she bounded up and down the gargantuan dunes while I lagged farther and farther behind. If it weren’t for the guilt of abandoning her, I would’ve given up. I was glad I didn’t, though, as Phoebe finally stopped at the top of a large dune.

From the base, I trudged after her on all fours. Luckily, the storm had kicked up a sheet of sand that hadn’t yet become scorched. Unluckily, this loosely packed layer meant that for every two steps I ascended, I slipped backward one. After a mountain of toil, I arrived at the peak and keeled over by Phoebe’s feet.

“Phoebe?” I said between breaths. “Are you okay?”

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Phoebe stood motionless. She was muttering to herself, loud enough to hear but too fast to understand. Her gaze remained fixed on a stirring at the bottom of the valley. I followed her eyes to a group of people clothed from head to toe in cloaks. Each member held the end of a chain, and all their chains were coiled around a person.

A prisoner.

The prisoner thrashed, pulling some captors off their feet and dragging them along the sandstone. In response, the standing captors would pull and squeeze until the prisoner was in too much pain to continue. Then the fallen captors would stand. As soon as the prisoner's breath returned, however, the violent tug-of-war would continue.

As I watched the conflict, a blur caught my eye on the far side of the valley. A new figure was flying upwards for hundreds of feet. It was as if they were soaring over an entire dune. And as their momentum carried them farther, I grew convinced they were flying—until they started falling. A tight dread swelled in my chest as they neared the ground, and I tensed in anticipation of their landing.

“Phillip,” Phoebe said, her voice loud and clear.

I looked up at her, hoping she'd finally snapped out of her trance. “Yes?”
Nothing.

Like a missile, the figure landed. Snapped rock echoed around the valley, and a flurry of sand obscured everything between the dunes. The shockwave traveled so far that I had to hold my hand up to my eyes to protect my vision.

When the dust settled, the new challenger was standing in the center of a small crater, completely unharmed. Oddly enough, I recognized this person. It was the Briar. She was clothed head to toe in her black wrappings, face obscured. She turned to face the group of captors, one hand clenched into a fist and the other wrapped around a rifle.

The Briar shouted, though the cascading winds covered her words. There

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was a rush of commotion among the captors that lasted until the largest of them dropped his chain and faced the girl. There was something intimidating about this man, but I didn't know how to process it. It was like the sight of him evoked an emotion I'd never felt before. Somehow, under the desert sun, I felt cold.

"Thanatos," Phoebe said. And then she resumed her fast-paced, unintelligible muttering.

The man, Thanatos I assumed, trudged forward until he was halfway between the two parties. Then, he stopped and waved his hand through the air. Beside the Briar, a pocket of sand shot up from the ground, wrapped around the rifle, and dragged it underground. The gun was gone, and all that remained was a small mound of dirt.

Now safe, Thanatos opened his arms like a preacher and spoke words I couldn't hear. The Briar listened. As they conversed, the world stiffened and the air felt heavy, as though fate itself clung to this very moment. The two fighters exchanged words for several minutes, gesturing toward the prisoner who was no longer struggling to escape, but instead listening with investment. But as Thanatos and the Briar grew more animated, I got the feeling they weren't seeing eye-to-eye. When it was clear the negotiations were going nowhere, Thanatos pulled down his hood, and the Briar assumed a stance. It seemed they agreed on one point only: violence would settle their dispute.

I shuddered, clenching my whole body. From their bodies, a wave of power careened in all directions, and as their aura washed over me, I felt small and weak. The two would-be fighters were lava and water; lightness and darkness; immovable and unstoppable. This wasn't going to end well.

Striking first, the Briar squared her shoulders and heaved a knife across the valley, but the large man dodged it. From somewhere I wasn't looking, a gunshot rang out. Instinctively, I ducked down. Phoebe didn't even flinch. She remained standing, whispering. I pulled at her leg to encourage her to hide, but

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she ignored me. I let her be and pressed the back of my head against the sand.

From the valley, I heard another ***bang*** and a pained growl. I glanced at Phoebe's face hoping her expression would betray the context of the fight, but Phoebe showed nothing. She remained locked to the action, stoic. As more noises began to sound, curiosity chewed at me, and when a flicker of light illuminated the valley, I lifted my head to peer back over the dune.

The captors had dragged the prisoner a safe distance away from the fight, their chains still taut. Slightly closer than before, Thanatos had his hands stretched out, and between his palms, a ball of fire was expanding. This inferno grew rapidly until it was as large as his body. With a casual flick, he sent the fireball blazing toward the Briar.

The Briar crossed her forearms. In response to her motion, a pocket of sand shot up from the ground and compacted itself into a thick wall between her and Thanatos. Instantly, the flames met the wall of sand, and the two forces fought for control. As the fire chewed through the barrier, the Briar gritted harder, packing more and more sand into her shield. The fire raged harder, burning brightest before eventually dimming. In the end, little more than an ember remained—and then nothing.

Amid the heat, the wall transformed to a platform of glass. It shimmered before cracking down the center. The Briar leaned into it with her shoulder and thrust forward. The wall shattered, and a thousand crystalline shards were sent rocketing across the field toward Thanatos.

This was it. Thanatos was facing a wall of spikes with nowhere to run—and yet, a fraction of a second before impact, he conjured a formless black wall. It was unlike anything I'd ever seen. Every glass bullet that touched the void disintegrated into a powder. By the end of the assault, little more than glitter had peppered the man, but even this seemed to agitate him.

The Briar froze, struggling to understand what happened. I let out a defeated breath. This girl was fighting out of her league. Why did she pick this

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fight? What insanity led her to this moment?

Thanatos brushed away the dust and let out his frustration with a roar, ready to end this. His hand opened, and a long chain materialized in his grip, popping into existence the same way Mal had conjured her knife. Once formed, he whipped it to test the range. It let out a bold *crack* that left a ringing in my ears. I cringed. Satisfied, he unleashed his assault, snapping wildly at the space around the Briar.

She mobilized quickly, dodging back and forth to stay one step ahead. One step became a half-step, and then a quarter. Each successive strike sent a billowing puff of sand into the air. With the terrain growing more and more scarred, it was only a matter of time before the chain struck true. Sure enough, the Briar took a misstep and became ensnared. Suddenly, she was just a body trapped by steel.

Movement caught my eye, and for the first time since the battle began, the prisoner thrashed to escape—though this time they were easily reined in, left only with the power to scream.

With his fish on the line, Thanatos yanked the chain back and forth, sending the Briar flying. She smashed into sandstone, rocks, and walls of sand. Each hit loosened the coil, and as the chain was about to give out, Thanatos rolled it one last time toward the sky. The Briar whipped free and was sent soaring my direction, limbs sprawling. She landed with a *crunch* just a few yards down the slope. After a small slide, there was nothing more. Just silence.

My heart dropped.

She was dead; I was sure of it.

But I was wrong.

The Briar stirred, rolling to her side. Slowly, agonizingly, she propped herself up on one arm—the other hung limp by her side. With another sloppy motion, she moved her leg beneath her and trembled to her knees. And with a final push, she stood.

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Her blood-soaked hood hung askew over her face, impeding her vision. She took large, heavy breaths, and coughed into the fabric. Its color darkened as blood stained it from the other side. With her only good arm, the Briar reached behind her neck and ripped the mask away, tossing aside the scrap and revealing her blood-soaked face.

What?

I squinted to make sure I was seeing things right. I recognized the face, but this wasn't the same Briar from my dream. It wasn't the same person who saved me from Mal. They weren't even a girl. Now, I knew there were at least two Briars—because this Briar was *me*.

Chapter 8

Death Before Life

PHYSICALLY, THE BRIAR LOOKED *exactly* like me. He had the same black hair. The same pale skin. The same unremarkable face. The same *everything*. He was a perfect doppelgänger in every way. The only difference was the way he carried himself. This version held an air of righteousness in his posture—and anger in his eyes. Despite being my clone, his fearlessness made him look like a stranger.

The doppelgänger turned and looked at me. I met his gaze, thinking we were making eye contact, but something wasn't right. He was staring *through* me, not *at* me. His stare lingered a moment before he averted his eyes, coughed more blood, and collapsed to the dirt.

This time, he didn't try to stand.

Thanatos let go of the chain whip and lifted his hood back over his face. His visage was shadowlike as he trudged up the dune, moving toward the Briar. With each step, his feet sank deep in the sand, but he shuffled through it as though it were just inch-deep water. Mere steps from the mangled body, he held open his hand. The space around his palm glimmered with black specks of light—or rather, the absence of light. A long, ethereal shaft materialized in his grasp and extended in both directions. Once it'd stretched out fully, the top curled into the bladed edge of a scythe.

The god of death had come to reap.

At the bottom of the valley, the men holding the prisoner cheered as their captive rocked back and forth, desperate to escape.

“Phillip!” the prisoner screamed, their words echoing off the dunes.
“*Phillip!*”

Everything became very real. That was *my* name. This wasn't some empty

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body about to die. It was *me*. I was about to die.

I stood, but nausea rooted me in place. What was I going to do? Stand up to death himself? No, I couldn't.

Despite being only a stone's throw away, Thanatos didn't notice me. He kept his focus on the doppelgänger and knelt by him. Behind his hood, I could only see his lips as he whispered a message. When he finished, he snatched my nearly dead body off the ground and heaved it up for the spectators to see. The captors cheered; the prisoner thrashed.

"Phillip!"

Thanatos slammed my doppelgänger back into the sand and raised his scythe high against the sun.

The wind stilled. The sand settled. The desert calmed. There was an eerie silence, as though the universe had stopped to pay its respects. The balance of fate had tipped, and a new reality was upon us. We all felt it.

But the prisoner was not going to accept it. They pulled harder than ever and forced a chain link to snap. Then a second chain, and a third. An odd illusion painted itself through the haze as the prisoner fought, and it appeared as though their body was shedding white light. They looked like a nuclear bomb glowing just moments before going critical.

But whatever the prisoner was doing, it was too late. Thanatos swung and—

I closed my eyes and looked away, just in time to catch a flash of light that sent me hurtling back to the land of the living.



My chest compressed, and I let out a wretched sound. I could've tried to stop

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Thanatos. I could've helped. I could've done anything. *Something*. But I didn't. I just let myself die.

"You're awake, Phillip," Teddy said, gripping my shoulder. "It's okay. You're awake."

I wiped away my tears to hide them from Phoebe, but it was too late. She was already sitting upright, staring at me. Though her face was also red, she maintained her composure. To her, this was business as usual.

"What happened?" Teddy asked.

I sputtered to speak. "T-There was a d-desert, and a man with a hood, a-and—"

"We shared a nightmare," Phoebe interjected, her voice calm. "It was a little gruesome and disconcerting, but it was just a regular shared dream."

My heart skipped a beat, and amid the turmoil, I'd almost forgotten that we'd shared a dream. And that meant...

"You're a coalescent!" Teddy said, clapping his hands together.

The pendulum of my emotions swung, and I forgot all about the horrors I'd just seen. It wasn't real—and in fact, it was a good thing! The vibe in the room shifted immediately.

"Let's get right to business then, shall we?" Teddy withdrew a sheet of paper. "We have new recruit classes starting every Monday, so your first class will be tomorrow. After ten weeks of training, we'll assign you a specialty and you'll move into the mentorship program. Are you ready?"

It was all moving so fast I could hardly process it.

"Phoebe, you're free to carry on with your day," Teddy said. "Thanks for your help."

"Of course!" Phoebe clasped her hands together before moving toward the door. "See you tomorrow, Phillip." She flashed a smile and left, taking my memories of the dream along with her.

I turned back to Teddy who was printing a new stack of papers.

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“Before we go any further, I’ll need you to sign this contract,” he said, placing the papers on the table before me. “You need to read these carefully. While our existence is classified as an unacknowledged special access program, we *do* use a military-like contract. Signing this will enlist you to our ranks for four years and bind you to the legal standards outlined in the UCMJ. In exchange for your time, we’ll provide basic pay, housing, medical insurance, and even college benefits upon discharge.”

That sounded like money. Opportunity. Security. It was everything I’d ever wanted. I signed the bottom of the contract without reading a word and shoved the papers back to Teddy. He filed the contract in a drawer and withdrew a webcam. Seconds later, I was holding an official access card that gave me standard coalescent clearance for Levels One and Two. As I stared over the card, Teddy searched for a room I could occupy—a task that had him scratching his head.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Well, all of our housing units are full right now,” he answered. “Everything except the model unit on the first floor. It’s separated from the other dorms, but...” He paused to do some mental math. “Well, it’s not surrounded by deuterium. But since every other bedroom has deuterium walls, that shouldn’t be a problem. Either way, it’s a free room if you want it.”

Everything he said about deuterium was gibberish, but ‘free’ was a word I understood well.

“I’ll take it.”

“Great,” Teddy said. “Let’s go check out—” he double-checked the computer screen, “—Room 108.”

With an excited push, Teddy wheeled back from his desk and bounded out the door. I followed him out and down the stairs. Along the way, he gave me a makeshift tour of the four floors of Level One.

The fourth floor was filled with executive offices, though most of these

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rooms were unoccupied. The third floor was the dormitory floor, but we brushed past it, as this wasn't where my room would be. Classrooms lined the outskirts of the second floor, and the ground level had all the amenities, including a library, a bowling alley, a commissary, a gym, and several recreational spaces.

"And we're here," Teddy said, stopping outside a plain room labeled as 108. "It's an odd location, I know, but it's cozy. Go ahead. Hold your card up to the door."

I did as he asked, and the door slid open. The room was simple, with a bed in the corner, a dresser against the wall, and a small desk on the far end. With no trash scattered about, I felt like I was being issued a clean slate.

"I love it," I said. "Thank you."

"Of course. Now—"

"Teddy!" A booming, panicked voice echoed through the halls, stemming from a large man who was storming down the hallway toward the two of us. This man was several inches taller than me, built like a tank, and visibly shaken.

"Cameron?" Teddy reflected the large man's anxiety. "Everything okay?"

"No, sir," Cameron said. "There's been an infiltration in Lucity. One person. We suspect they're from the Night Corps, but we're having trouble getting a visual."

"The Night Corps? In Lucity?" Teddy glanced at me, trying to decide if I should be dismissed or allowed to overhear. In the end, he decided timeliness was more important. "Who found them?"

"Anberlin."

"Is he okay?"

"Of course." By Cameron's tone, it was clear that Teddy's question was ridiculous. "He's already chased them away from the Exit Pad and set up a perimeter. But we need a plan of action."

"Perfect," Teddy said. "Grab Nate Logan. Have him meet me in the

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situation room.”

“Understood.”

The man was dismissed. He skirted toward the elevator, and Teddy turned to me.

“I’m sorry, Phillip. We’ll finish this another time. Until then, be sure to show up to class tomorrow on time.” With this, Teddy sped out of sight, leaving me alone.

I turned to the door and stared at it, letting emotions wash over me. For the first time in my life, I felt like an adult. I had a place to stay, a paycheck, insurance... What more could I want?

“Don’t you want to find out what’s going on in Lucy?” a deep voice asked from the other side of the hallway.

“Huh?”

I turned to see a tall, Black man around my age with an exceedingly muscular stature. The way he held himself exaggerated his size, which served well to command my attention. He took a few lumbering steps forward, eyeing the path Teddy had taken to the elevator.

“Come on, let’s follow him,” the man said. “If it’s important enough to pull my pops from Level Four, it has to be a big deal.”

I hesitated.

“My name’s Samson,” he said, extending his hand for a shake. “Samson Logan.”

“I’m Phillip.”

His hand engulfed mine as we shook, and I had to artificially strengthen my grip to come close to his natural clutch.

“You’re new here, aren’t you?” Samson asked. “You deserve a tour of Lucy, and I’d be happy to give you one. And I can answer any questions you have too. Want to come?”

This came out of nowhere. I certainly wanted to ask questions, but I knew

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so little about this place that I didn't even know what questions were worth asking. I started with an obvious one.

"Before I say yes, what's Lucity?"

"It's a brain that's locked into a dream. Because it can't wake up, we built a city inside it." Something in my expression must've betrayed my sense of *I'm talking to a crazy person* because he felt the need to add, "I'm serious. I'll show you."

He turned and strolled headlong down the hallway. I hesitated. On one hand, I wanted to settle into my new room, but on the other, I knew he could answer some questions. As was my go-to move under pressure, I froze.

Luckily, Samson stopped halfway down the hall and waved me toward him.

"Look, they won't care," he assured me. "Everyone's busy with the intruder. Trust me."

I sighed and followed before offloading some of the more pressing questions.

"Alright, so... What's the Night Corps?" I asked. "They're dangerous, right?"

"They're terrorists," Samson answered, guiding me to the elevator. "They do their murdering in dreams because it leaves behind no evidence. My dad says that if Mandala can respond quickly enough, they can find the attacker out in the real world, but they're incredibly hard to detect."

We arrived at the silver doors of the lift, and Samson pressed the call button. The doors swung open, and I followed Samson inside. After fidgeting with the panel, the elevator began its descent.

Murder in dreams? That couldn't be right.

"Doesn't anyone notice that people are dying in their sleep?"

"Of course they notice," Samson said. "But what would you believe—that dream terrorists are killing people? Or that brain aneurisms are on the

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rise? Heart attacks are surging? Carbon monoxide poisonings are climbing? If you know what you're looking for, you'll find dozens of cultures that have unique stories to explain it away. In South Korea, they believe it's ceiling fans that are killing them. In the Philippines, it's a vengeful spirit called Batibat. There was a group of Hmong refugees in Laos that collectively died in their sleep, and nobody investigated. *We* know what happened, but the public? They'll do anything to believe it's *anything else*."

The elevator slowed to a stop. I squared up against the silver door, expecting it to open, but the elevator lurched sideways and slid lengthwise along a set of rails, throwing me off balance.

"Whoa. Where's this thing going?"

"Lucy has to be separated from the rest of the complex. Otherwise, it would interfere with the top-secret research on Level Four. Believe it or not, it was cheaper to build a mile of underground tunnels than it was to fill a big room with deuterium."

I nodded, starting to piece together the world here. Deuterium must be a substance that prevented people from sharing dreams. Level Four was something like Area 51. And Level Two was...

The elevator stopped moving, and the doors sprang open to expose a large, dark room filled with beds. There was a slight hum as diluted mela gas poured in from the air vents, and a strange aquarium stood in the middle of the room. The tank was small and squarish, filled with a green liquid and a large, immobile fleshy thing. Samson led me closer, and my eyes adjusted to see what was lurking on the other side of the glass.

It was a human brain.

"This here is Lucy," Samson said, pointing at the purplish mass.

My eyes gravitated toward a small plaque near the base.

This brain was anonymously donated for establishing a permanent dream.

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“Is it real?” I asked, staring at the wires that pumped electricity directly into the folds of the brain as it twitched and pulsed.

“Yeah. Find a bed and fall asleep. I’ll show you around.”

Chapter 9

The World of Lucy

MY EYES OPENED IN another dimension. Everything was a little airy, and though my surroundings were unfamiliar, it didn't seem to matter. Nothing seemed to matter. In fact, I was so out of it, I didn't even flinch when Samson popped into existence a few feet away. He said something muddled and unintelligible. I ignored him.

“Hey. *Hey!*” He snapped his fingers in front of my nose. “You’re dreaming.”

Suddenly, I understood. The haze lifted from my brain, and I grew cognizant of my surroundings. But how did I end up here? To ground myself, I ran through my recent past: the girl of my dreams warned me to run, Grandpa woke up, I was attacked by Mal, I ran to Mandala, and now...

“I’m here,” I said.

“Good,” Samson said. “Now, as I was saying, welcome to Lucy.”

My eyes widened as I took in my new surroundings. I felt like an astronaut on a new planet. To one side, I found a smattering of statues and monuments, houses and huts, gardens and fountains, and every variety of decoration I could imagine. At the edge of the arrangement stood an enormous castle with ivory towers and a moat. Even from this distance, I could mark the details of the enormous gargoyle statues that watched over the drawbridge.

“My dad helped build that castle for last year’s Research Symposium,” Samson said. “They showcased some early advancements in the consistency of telekinesis and the safety of biological, uh, something-or-other. I’ll be honest, I’m not entirely sure what my dad was studying, but it sounded cool.”

I turned my gaze and found a massive city with impossibly tall skyscrapers.

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There were thousands of rooms in each building, far more than they'd ever need, and they all looked unoccupied. Every now and again, someone would shuffle in front of a window, but this was a rarity and not a rule.

"The city was built for the symposium *two* years ago," Samson continued. "It was a showcase of possibilities. An exhibition of engineering, they called it, which I thought was a little corporate, but whatever. It made the right point—that we can build whatever we want here."

"It's incredible," I said, marveling at the scale. "And what did they build before the city?"

"Nothing. Lucity's only two years old."

"Two years?! How did they build everything in two years?"

"In dreams, people can make anything they want," Samson said. "Things that would take years to build in the real world are built here in a matter of days... hours... less."

"What?" I looked over the world again, trying to imagine it being built over the course of an afternoon. "How?"

"You just have to focus," he said. "I mean, it's a lot more nuanced than that. You have to focus really, really hard. But it's simpler than you'd expect."

"Can you show me?"

Samson hesitated for a moment, drawing a short breath that betrayed his apprehension. Then he relented with an easy smile. "Of course I can. Give me a second to get into the right headspace."

He closed his eyes. His brow furrowed and his veins bulged. The space in front of him sparked as his entire body shook. I watched tensely, waiting for something to pop into existence, but after an entire minute, nothing happened.

"Anything?"

"No."

"Okay, okay. Hold on." His voice carried a panicked note, and he closed his eyes again. With every passing moment, he grew more and more nervous

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about failing, and I grew more and more uncomfortable about asking. After a minute, I'd stopped believing he could do it, so it was particularly surprising when a metal pole popped into the world. It suspended itself in the air before falling to the ground with a dull *thud*.

"Whoa."

In that moment, many events clicked. The knife. The gasoline. The things I could now vaguely remember from my dream with Phoebe. They were all created like this.

Samson opened his eyes and gasped for air.

"That's so cool," I said. "You can make *anything*?"

"Anything," Samson said, picking the pole up from the ground.

"Can you teach me how it works?"

"Mmm..." Samson leaned on the stick. "My dad taught me the basics and even then, this is pretty much the only thing I can make."

"You've only ever made metal poles?"

"Well, I can make wooden ones too," Samson said defensively. "But yeah. My dad's pretty important around here, so we haven't done much training together. That's why I'm in the basics class and couldn't go straight into mentorship. But I'll be out in no time, you'll see."

"Yeah," I said airily, looking around again to marvel at all the structures surrounding me. "So, what's the coolest thing here? Is it just the castle and the city?"

"Well, there's a theme park out west and an airfield up north. I bet you could travel in any direction and find someone's pet project. There'll be plenty of time for that later, though. Right now, you'll need to know about the Exit Pad. Without it, you wouldn't be able to wake up. Come on, I'll show you where it is."

It hadn't even occurred to me I would need a way to escape a forever-long dream, so I was glad Samson brought it up. We stepped off together

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toward the city, and as we walked Samson played the role of a tour guide, using his pole to point at buildings.

“We’re in the business district right now. The city is the most important component of Lucity. Some of the buildings, like that one, are for secure meetings. Some are private living spaces. Most, though, are still empty, save for mountains of paperwork.

“Paperwork? Here? Why?”

“Because it’s the safest place to keep secrets,” Samson said. “The documents that are stored here are impossible to leak. You could carry an original document straight to the Exit Pad and never get it out into the real world. In a way, this is the most secure server on the planet. My dad tells me they’re working to get approval from the DoD to store all top-secret documents here, but there’s a hitch.”

“A hitch?”

“Yeah, a big one,” Samson said. “Somehow, a mole has been getting secret information from Lucity to the Night Corps, and we don’t know how. We had no leads until today—that’s why everyone’s freaking out. This is the first time we’ve caught the Night Corps in the act, and while we still don’t know how they got here, we do know that they’ll have to leave through...” Samson stretched out the last word as we rounded the corner, “*that.*”

Amongst all the glorious structures in the city, I had imagined the Exit Pad would be a lavish hub, as grandiose and limitless as Lucity would allow it to be. Instead, it was a simple monochromatic dome with no polish or detail. The most interesting thing about it wasn’t the building itself, but the makeshift army that surrounded it.

“Is it always so guarded?”

“Never,” Samson said, brimming with excitement. “They must be expecting the intruder to come this way soon.”

My skin crawled. The Exit Pad looked much more appealing now that I

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knew it was my ticket to safety, but also much more terrifying now that I knew it was dangerous to linger. We clambered down the slope and scrambled to the commotion. As we got closer, I could hear the leader shouting orders.

“Expand the perimeter! Scout the city! Pay attention to moving shadows!”

When the leader saw us, he stopped and eyed us.

“Both of you—halt!” the man ordered. “State your names.”

“Samson Logan.”

“Phillip Wolfe.”

The man softened considerably and approached with a wide smile. His features were distinctly Native American, though his manner of dress was purely Western. He was in his mid-forties, yet he held himself with the vibrancy of someone ten years younger. From our initial distance, he looked vaguely familiar, like I’d seen him before in the background of a dream, but as he stepped closer, that sense of familiarity faded.

Samson cleared his throat and tried to speak professionally. “Hello, sir. I was showing Phillip around Lucity before our class begins tomorrow. It’s his first time here, so I thought I’d show him the Exit Pad first.”

“Well, welcome to Lucity, Phillip,” the man said warmly. “And thank you for showing him around. My name is Anberlin. It’s nice to meet you.”

“You’re Anberlin?” Samson’s eyes glimmered. “My dad talks about you all the time. You’re the one who built the Exit Pad! You’re brilliant!”

Anberlin smirked halfway.

“Yes,” he said. “Now, I’m sorry if you have somewhere to be, but I’ll have to ask you to come back in a few hours. We’re on total lockdown. This pad is the infiltrator’s only way out, so they’ll have to come this way eventually. We’re determined to keep it locked down until they’re found.”

“We can help you guard the place,” Samson said, lifting his pole to show Anberlin the makeshift weapon.

“Thanks, but it’s handled,” Anberlin said. “Your dad would never forgive

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me if you got killed in here.”

“But—”

“I insist,” he said. “If you’re going to die, it’s better to go down as a competent hero than a foolish one.”

I thought of the dream I shared with Phoebe—or what little of it I remembered, as most of it had already faded from my memory.

“We can help,” Samson pleaded. “I swear.”

“Can you make a gun?” Anberlin challenged.

“No.”

“Can you make a shield?”

“Well, no...”

“Can you make any weapon stronger than a stick?”

Samson frowned.

“It’s okay that you can’t,” Anberlin said softly, recognizing the effect of his words. “That’s why you’re in initial training. It’s important you do a proper self-assessment and understand that you’re not ready to be here. Go hide somewhere in the city or out in the desert beyond. I’m willing to bet the park is safe. Ride the roller coaster and check back in a few hours.”

“But that’s so far away,” Samson protested.

“Exactly,” Anberlin said. “You’ll be an asset to us in a few months when you’re more experienced, but if you die today, you’ll never have that chance.”

“Okay,” I interjected before Samson could fight any more. “We’ll stay out of your way.”

“Thank you. Be careful.”

Samson grumbled as we walked away, and I led him back up the slope into the city.

“He doesn’t know what he’s talking about,” Samson said once we were out of earshot. “We can still be useful to Mandala. The intruder *must* escape through the Exit Pad, so if we stay close...” he trailed off, looking for approval.

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I sifted through my options.

“Maybe you can teach me how to create stuff,” I said. “We can stay a little out of the way, but if the intruder *does* come around, it’d be nice for me to know how to defend myself.”

It was a decent compromise, and I was relieved when Samson agreed. We trudged off the beaten path for a few blocks and stopped in the middle of an unpopulated street. There, Samson leaned on his pole and began a long-winded explanation of the ins and outs of what he called creation. Unfortunately, he wasn’t a great teacher, and the bulk of his instruction came down to, ‘and then you just do it.’

“That’s not it,” Samson said.

“I know,” I replied, frustrated. “I’m really trying.”

“Try in, like, a different way. Like, you have to do more than picture the item. You have to feel yourself doing the work. Making it. Be an artist *and* an engineer.”

“What do you mean? I’m trying to make a stick. What work goes into a stick?”

“Look, you just have to picture it in your mind and then, like, your body does its thing,” Samson said. “Watch me again...”

Samson closed his eyes, but before he could tune his thoughts, the harsh sound of gunfire reverberated off the glass walls of the skyscrapers. Down the street, a window shattered and shards rained down onto the street.

We turned to see a lone figure running up the road toward us. The runner was pure black, as though they were a shadow themselves. I thought this was a play of light until they got a few steps closer and never grew brighter. Behind the shadow, a loud, booming voice called out to us.

“It’s the Night Corps! Run!”

I scrambled to the side to take cover, but Samson stood resolute in the middle of the road. He brandished his metal pole, and as the figure got closer,

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he gripped it like a bat, ready to strike.

Chapter 10

The Intruder

STOP HIM, A MYSTERIOUS voice echoed from inside my head. It was like something had hijacked my brain to think their thoughts.

The dark figure charged ahead, spraying bullets over their shoulder. The chasers fired back, aiming high to avoid hitting Samson. The bullets *pinged* as they ricocheted off the steel beams and kicked up dirt. This should've been a warning for Samson to move, but he did not.

Stop Samson or he'll die.

Compelled, I sprang from my hiding spot and tackled Samson to the ground. Violently, we rolled aside just in time for the shadow to sprint past and weave around the next corridor. A handful of men darted after. Then, nothing. We barely had time for the dust to settle before the street was empty again.

I took a handful of breaths, relieved. Samson seethed.

“What the hell?” he spat, clambering to his feet. “I had them!”

“I—They were going to kill you!”

“NO! I was going to kill *them!* Why did you stop me?! That was my chance! AUGH!”

Samson slammed the metal rod into the dirt and flicked it away, rocketing it down an alley. It clanked off a trash bin before thudding to the ground. A second later, another rod ripped into existence, this one created without strain. He snatched it out of the air and smashed it against windows and walls. He beat everything around him until he could no longer lift his arms, and then he swung wildly at the air, cursing.

I sank away. A part of me wanted to apologize for tackling him, but

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another part of me felt as though he should be appreciative that I'd saved his life.

In the distance, a scuffle broke out at the Exit Pad. A dozen gunshots sounded off the walls, followed by a long bout of silence.

"They'll take care of it," I told Samson.

Samson whipped around and puffed up his body, his eyes wild with fury. I flinched, certain he was about to hit me. But he didn't. Instead, we locked eyes, and he froze. After a long moment, he softened and tossed the rod aside.

"Fine. Whatever. You're right. Maybe they will." He looked away, and the more his rational mind returned, the less he wanted to make eye contact. "Let's go back, yeah? The Exit Pad's probably open again."

Samson held out his hand to pick me off the ground. Reluctantly, I accepted the gesture. Once on my feet, I dusted myself off and let Samson get a few steps ahead of me.

Good work, the foreign voice sounded in my head again. ***You're Phillip Wolfe, is that right?***

Yes, I thought back.

Speak up.

"Yes," I whispered.

"What's that?" Samson stopped and turned around.

Don't tell him about me.

"Oh, uh, I just wanted you to slow down."

"Yeah, no, sorry," Samson said, suddenly a little too polite for my liking. I half-jogged to catch up with him, and we marched together to the Exit Pad.

As we walked, my mind split in two, and I couldn't figure out if I wanted to speak with Samson or the voice. Samson seemed to take my silence as an indication that I wasn't interested in conversation, which, to be fair, his outburst had left a bad taste in my mouth. So, we traveled silently until the Exit Pad crested into view. A line of people had amassed outside the dome,

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forming an orderly queue to the entrance.

“There’re more people here than I thought,” I said.

Samson breathed a sigh of relief, happy I was talking to him again.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “You can put a few thousand people in a city, and it’d still feel like a ghost town. Sometimes I wonder what the point is of having all this space for just a few people.”

As we moved down the sloped pathway to enter the queue, we saw Anberlin rushing back and forth, managing the various needs of those around him. Once he was close, Samson called him over and asked what had happened.

“They were a shapeshifter,” he said. “They turned into a bird and flew right past us.” Anberlin shook his head, berating himself. “I haven’t seen a good shapeshifter in over a decade. I thought it was a lost art. Had I known...”

Samson’s eyes flashed red.

“Do you think they’ll be back?” I asked.

“I’m sure of it,” Anberlin said. “So, be careful coming here in the future, okay? And Samson—do you know where your father is? I’m supposed to bring him to the situation room, but I haven’t seen him yet.”

“Sorry,” Samson said, shaking his head. “I haven’t seen him in a couple weeks.”

“That’s okay. He’s around somewhere. I’ll find him.”

Anberlin’s eyes shifted farther down the line and landed on a woman flagging him down. Politely, he excused himself and ran off to meet her.

“So, how does this work?” I asked Samson, staring down the enigmatic Exit Pad. The line was moving fast, but I couldn’t tell what people were doing to wake up. All I saw were people entering the dome—and then nothing.

“There’s a button on the inside surrounded by a circle. All you need to do is stand somewhere in the circle and press the button.”

“Okay, but how does it *work*?”

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Samson shrugged before giving an impressively thorough answer.

“The Exit Pad is a kind of enlarged electroconvulsive net. You go into the room, and it administers very specific shocks to your brain. These shocks activate the neural regions responsible for waking, and your body responds by believing the dream to be over.”

“Oh, that’s clever. So, do you make one of these in every dream so you can wake up whenever you want to?”

“No.” Samson stifled a chuckle. “Even at maximum efficiency, it would take several hours to construct one of these. Most dreams don’t last that long, so it’d be pointless to try. The only reason this one exists is because Lucy lasts forever.”

By this point in his explanation, we had reached the front of the line.

“It’s my turn,” Samson said. “Just hit the button after I’m gone, and I’ll see you on the other side.”

Samson walked up to the dome and strode to the middle of the room. The door closed behind him. There was a hum, a vibration, and a snap. Then the doors opened again, and Samson was gone.

I was next.

Nervously, I stepped into the pad. Inside, it was a plain white room with a dozen metal coils nested in the ceiling, buzzing with electricity. A bright red button sat atop a pedestal in the center of the room, begging to be pressed.

I took a few steps past the entryway, and the door closed behind me. I took a few steps more and found myself at the pedestal. Apprehension swelled as I eyed the button, and something deep inside clawed out with a desire to press it. I obeyed.

See you next time, Phillip, the voice spoke in my head.

“Wait. Who—”

The entire pad whirred as energy swirled about the room. A second later, the energy in the coils discharged, and lightning surged through my body. My

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skin burned and my heart ripped at an irregular rhythm. Every muscle in my body tightened until—



I slammed awake in bed at Level Two. My throat was dry, and I was shivering. The fried edges of my hair were conditioned again, and the memory of the shock was now a distant, dull impression.

I drew a breath and looked around, finding Samson propped up on his bed, staring at the ground. I raised my eyebrows, trying to make eye contact, but he refused to meet my gaze.

“Hey, listen,” Samson started. “I’m sorry I lost my temper earlier... I know you were only trying to protect me. So... you know... thanks.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I just smiled.

“I’ll see you at class tomorrow, right?” Samson asked. “Coalescence Basics?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Good,” Samson said, jumping to his feet and beginning his retreat to the elevator. “I’ll see you then.” Halfway down the hall, he stopped and faced me again. “I’m sorry again. I’m trying to be better.”

“It’s okay,” I said with a half-smile. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He nodded, and moments later, he was gone.

Chapter 11

The First Day of School

IT WAS NICE TO have a safe, uneventful night of sleep, and my body woke on its own. For minutes, I stared at the ceiling and smiled. This was my life now. I had a safe place to sleep, three meals a day, and a steady paycheck. What more could I need?

When my alarm sprang to life, I dragged myself out of bed, brushed my teeth, and got dressed. Then, I made my way upstairs to the classroom. I was one of the first to arrive, so I chose a seat in the back and twiddled my thumbs. The corner desks filled up first as more people arrived, and an awkward silence pervaded the room.

Minutes passed, and everyone had spread out across the room. Each person looked more comfortable than I felt, and the longer I waited, the more doubt crept into my heart.

What if I'm no good at coalescence? Or what if everyone else is already good at it, like Samson?

As though he'd been summoned by my thoughts, Samson entered the room. After yesterday's scuffle, I was afraid he was going to avoid me, but instead, he made his way to a desk beside mine and sank into it as though this had been his assigned seat all year long. Upon seeing my face, he smirked.

"You nervous?" he asked.

"No," I blurted.

"You look nervous."

I smiled and ignored him. He was right.

The door opened again, and Phoebe stepped inside. A hot flash swept across my body as she looked around the room, maneuvered past a row of

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desks, and took the chair in front of me. There, she stashed her notebook and faced me.

“Morning, Phillip,” she said brightly.

“Hey,” I said, trying to keep my tone casual.

She turned to Samson and reached out for a handshake. “Good morning to you too. I’m Phoebe.”

“Samson. You know Phil?”

“I tested him for coalescence yesterday.”

Samson tilted his head, confused. “Don’t they use precognitors for that?”

“They do.”

Samson narrowed his eyes.

“She’s a precognitor,” I said, solving the puzzle for him.

“Oh, you’re in the wrong classroom,” he said earnestly. “Precognitors have their orientation on Wednesday.”

“I know. I got permission from Teddy to do coalescent stuff. Precognition is passive. I wanted something to do while waiting for my dreams to come.”

“So, you’re going to ride on the coattails of everyone else’s alpha waves?” Samson nodded approvingly. “Smart.”

“I guess so. Do you have any experience with coalescence?” she asked. “I’m a little nervous. I don’t know anything about dream sharing, or creation, or anything like that.”

Her words got me to relax.

“It’s not that difficult,” Samson said. “I’m sure you’ll get the—”

He was interrupted by the door flying open and the teacher walking in. A familiar face took a confident step inside, dressed in a sweater vest and khaki slacks.

“Hello, hello,” Anberlin said, placing his briefcase on the big desk up front. “My name is Professor Young, and this is Coalescence Basics. We’re all in the right place, yes?” He looked around the class, paused on Phoebe, and

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nodded.

“I can’t believe this,” Samson whispered. “We have Anberlin as our teacher?”

“Perfect. It looks like everyone’s here. Now, before we begin—” Anberlin shuffled some papers around, “—I should warn you that every moment matters in this class. Every action, statement, and thought will contribute to your end-of-class exam result, and that result will determine your specialty. So, my greatest piece of advice is to make *everything* count.

“Now, with today being your first lesson, we will not be sharing dreams. Instead, our topic will be the mechanics and origins of coalescence. What is it? Where did it come from? And why do we share dreams?”

Knowing this was going to be a basic lesson, most of the class spaced out. I, however, was excited to start at square one. I tore open the cover of my notebook and readied for notes.

“To start, I have a simple question for you all,” Anberlin said.

“I love easy questions,” Samson whispered to me.

“I didn’t say it was easy—I said it was simple,” Anberlin said, raising his eyebrows at Samson. Samson smiled abashedly and looked down at his desk. “How can I fall asleep?”

There was a lull in the room. His question was hard to make sense of. It was too simple and too obtuse at the same time.

“Imagine I’d never slept before, and I needed your coaching to figure it out,” Anberlin said. “How would you guide me toward sleep?”

A brave soul in the middle of the room was the first to answer. “You just lie down and close your eyes.”

“Maybe.” Anberlin shrugged. “Let’s try it.” He strode to his desk, lay atop it, and closed his eyes. After a moment, he peeked out of one eye. “Am I asleep?”

“Well, you have to wait,” a new voice called out.

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“And how long should I wait?” Anberlin asked. “Ten minutes? Twenty? An hour?”

“It depends on how tired you feel,” a third student said.

“Interesting,” Anberlin said, sitting back up. “What’s tired? How do you *feel* tired?”

The class mulled over his question for a minute.

“It just... happens,” someone said. “You spend energy and then you get tired.”

“Alright,” Anberlin said speculatively. “So, you spend energy, lay down, close your eyes, wait an unspecified amount of time, and then... is that sleep?”

The class quieted. That was obviously how it worked, but it was also incomplete. Anberlin let this puzzlement spread through the room and waited to see if anyone could add anything more. We couldn’t.

“So,” Anberlin said. “You’re telling me that you’ve spent a third of your life sleeping, yet nobody can explain exactly how it works? That’s strange, isn’t it?”

There was a gentle murmur of agreement.

“You know,” he mused, “it might be a good idea to get those notebooks out.”

The students who had kept their desk clear reached into their bags and withdrew their supplies. As they did, Anberlin wrote a handful of words on the whiteboard: alpha waves, rules, and origins.

“So, when we were talking about sleep,” he said, “everyone can tell me what it looks like on the outside, but nobody understands what’s happening on the inside. Sleep is primarily a biological process, and as such, it involves a physical change to your body. More specifically, a change to your brain. There is a function in your brain—a switch, so to speak—that changes your mental state from conscious to nonconscious. Can anyone guess what triggers the change in your mental state?”

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Phoebe raised her hand, not much higher than her shoulder.

“Is it alpha waves?”

“Yes, it is,” Anberlin said with a congratulatory tone. “During the day, your brain vibrates at a specific wave frequency. This pattern has been called beta waves. Then, at the moment of transition to sleep, it switches to emit alpha waves. These alpha waves are responsible for dream sharing.”

I scribbled a rough definition in my notes.

Phoebe raised her hand and waited to be called on. “*Why* do alpha waves cause dream sharing?”

“To answer that, let me ask a different question. Phoebe—if you wanted to share information with Samson, what would you do?”

“I would just talk to him,” Phoebe said.

“Excellent. You’d spread the information by sending a wave through the air. You can do that because you have a mouth, and he can hear because he has ears. Think of alpha waves as the same kind of thing. A way to share information. Now, if you spoke English and Samson spoke Japanese, would that information be useful?”

“No.”

“Right. So before we can start sharing information, we need to agree on something much more basic—our language. And lucky for us, alpha waves speak the same language—physics. So when alpha waves meet in dreams, they set up an accurate scale of physics for the world and its inhabitants. Water is wet, fire is hot, etc. On that line of thought, what rules might be important for us to stay alive?”

For the first few seconds, nobody said anything.

“Think about the functions of your body and the properties of the world you take for granted,” Anberlin said, guiding the class. “Things that you do without mental input or things that are calculated by the universe itself.”

“Maybe breathing?” one student guessed.

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“Yes, that’s one,” Anberlin said. “Alpha waves understand and replicate the entire respiratory cycle.”

“Would gravity count?” another student guessed.

“Yes, good. We don’t need to know *how* gravity works in the universe—we simply agree that it does.”

“A person’s strength?” Samson guessed.

Anberlin paused, then nodded slowly. “It could be, from a certain perspective. Certainly, the physiology of how muscles and bones work count, but the specifics might be more negotiable than you think.” He turned to the class at large. “These are all great guesses, and each one targets a field of study we have designated here at Mandala. So, let’s dig deeper and break alpha waves into three types of rules: universal laws, neurological information, and intangibles.”

Anberlin wrote the words on the board and waited as I jotted them down behind him. As soon as I finished, he continued.

“So, let’s start by talking about universal laws. These are the laws pioneered by Isaac Newton, a prolific dreamer. Alpha waves transmit information about things such as gravity, potential energy, and conservation of momentum. They check to ensure reality is consistent between dreamers and produce a realm that makes sense to all contributing parties. In short, this is what makes a dream feel real.

“The next information is neurophysiological, such as your heartbeat, respiratory pattern, and levels of inflammation,” Anberlin said. “This is all highly technical, so if you’re getting lost, don’t worry about it. The gist of it is that your brain accepts the dream as your new reality and will signal your body appropriately. It will activate nerves in response to pain, release adrenaline in response to danger, and increase respiration in response to stress.”

I scrambled to find space to fit all the words before running into the margin at the bottom of my paper. The last few words were written in small

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letters and crammed atop each other, but I had to fit them in before turning to a new page.

“Last,” Anberlin said, “alpha waves transmit information about less tangible constructs, like willpower and empathy. This is the least understood—and most important—process. We learn new things about the functions and properties of these constructs all the time and share our findings at an annual research symposium. It’s also the only exploitable function of dream sharing, and thus, it is the main focus of our class.”

My face was red as I wrote, and Anberlin stopped to let me catch up. We exchanged a quick glance after I finished, to which he smiled and resumed his lecture.

“So, now it’s time for a small unit on history. Why did we *develop* the ability to share dreams? To understand this, we must understand what life was like for early humans. As a physically weak species, our strength has always been the ability to innovate. But innovation takes time, energy, and resources. A failed experiment will consume as many resources as a successful one. Shared dreams fix this by allowing people to build great structures under realistic conditions without consuming anything real. Without coalescence, there wouldn’t have been aqueducts in Rome, pyramids in Egypt, or gunpowder in China. These things would’ve been too risky to build.

“So, the next question I usually get is, ‘Why doesn’t everyone share dreams?’, and to that, I have a simple answer,” Anberlin said. “The reason is that alpha waves pulse at different strengths for different people. For non-coalescents, their alpha waves pulse at such a low strength that the waves get caught up in the skull and bounce within the mind, never extending outward to any meaningful degree. For coalescents, our alpha waves pulse with so much intensity they can penetrate the skull and start communicating with others. This is exactly like the difference between thinking and shouting. A shouter—or coalescent—can communicate with a thinker—or non-coalescent—but not

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vice-versa. That covers a wide array of information. Any questions so far?”

Someone in the front row raised their hand.

“Yes?”

“So, I understand what you’re saying on a biological level,” the student started, “but given how useful dream sharing is, why hasn’t everyone developed the ability? Why did it get weaker over time in the general population and not stronger?”

“That’s a good question,” Anberlin replied. “We start to see the decline of coalescence around the golden age of society. The gathering of people into villages, towns, and cities brought together a plethora of coalescents, and those who could share dreams were at risk of dying every night from accidents—or assassination. Over time, the strongest coalescents died as they were exposed to more opportunity for death, and it became more advantageous from an evolutionary perspective to have a smaller alpha sphere. This is why most people can’t initiate a shared dream. For them, dreams live on as a pointless function of biology.”

Dying? Assassination? These concepts had come up a few times now, but I didn’t quite understand the process behind it. Slowly, I raised my hand.

“Phillip?” Anberlin addressed me.

I swallowed, surprised he’d already remembered my name. “Uh, I just... I’m having trouble understanding why dream sharing went away.”

“Natural selection,” he said. “The genes that contribute to survivability get passed on, and as societies become more comfortable, the need for coalescence diminishes.”

“I get that, but how did dream sharing get selected out of the gene pool?”

“People died,” Anberlin said simply, not quite grasping my meaning.

“Oh, how, though?” I asked. “I’ve died in my dreams before and I’ve just woken up. What’s different about coalescence? How can a dream kill you?”

“Ah.” Anberlin paused and rubbed his hands together. “It’s about self-

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preservation. Here, I have an experiment for you.” He stepped behind his desk, opened his briefcase, and withdrew a knife. Then, he placed it on my desk. I gave him a skeptical look, but he nodded to reassure me.

“Hold the blade against the palm of your hand,” he said.

I did as he asked.

“Now cut yourself.”

“What?”

“Drag the blade across your hand,” Anberlin said, with such a casual tone he might’ve been asking me to stand and stretch. “Draw some blood.”

The class was now staring at me, watching as I struggled.

“Just a little nick,” he added. “It doesn’t have to be deep.”

“Why?”

“Just to prove you can.”

I sat still. To the rest of the class, I looked relaxed, but on the inside, I was mediating a war. Two versions of me fought inside my head, my brain advocating on behalf of my instincts, and my mind fighting to overcome it.

Don't do it, my brain ordered. It'll hurt.

I have to, my mind pressed. Everyone's watching.

Just put it down.

I can't.

You must.

If I put it down, I'll be embarrassed.

I gripped the knife tighter and closed my eyes.

If you cut yourself, my brain started, you'll be in pain. You don't want that.

What if embarrassment is worse than pain? my mind considered

You'll only believe that until you're in pain. Now, stop!

In the end, my instinct won out, and I dropped the knife on the desk.

“I can’t,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Anberlin said, picking the knife off the table. “The brain

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is *obsessed* with self-preservation. Given a sound mind, only the strongest of mind could do it without hesitation. Like this.”

Anberlin lifted the knife, displayed it to the class, and then stabbed himself in the chest.

The room exploded with reactions. I held my hands up to my mouth. Phoebe jumped out of her seat to help. Samson sat still, awestruck and eyes wide.

Anberlin chuckled. Chaos simmered to confusion.

“Only the strongest of mind—and those who know the knife is fake—can do it without hesitation,” Anberlin amended, pulling the blade out of his chest. He then pressed down on the tip, demonstrating how the blade slid down into the handle. It was nothing more than a theater prop. “I can stab myself all day if I know it’s fake. So can you. And that’s what a non-shared dream is—a fake knife. When you dream alone, your brain just changes reality. There aren’t any rules. It can jam guns, dull knives, soften concrete, or dissolve gravity. If it can do something to keep you alive, it’ll do it. But in a shared dream, reality is set. Since alpha waves communicate directly with your nervous system, if you die in a dream, your brain dies as well.”

He placed the knife back into his desk. The air in the room dried up. Nobody scratched a word onto their notepad or whispered a sentence to a friend. The atmosphere was suddenly one of a doctor’s office, and we’d been diagnosed with cancer.

“Look. My job is to give you the tools to prevent that outcome,” Anberlin said, bringing us back from despair, “but you must do your part. If you don’t take this class seriously, it might cost you your life.”

The class nodded. Anberlin retreated to his desk, shuffled around some papers, and allowed himself to smile.

“So anyway, welcome to Coalescence 101. This has been a great introductory lesson. Thank you to those who paid attention. For those who

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didn't, good luck on your end-of-class specialty placement exam. You'll need it. Tomorrow, we'll learn how to lucid dream, but until then, you're all dismissed. Enjoy the rest of your day."

Samson snatched his book bag and rose from his seat. I was quick behind him, moving fast in the hopes that I'd get lost in the bustle of the classroom.

"You guys want to grab lunch?" Samson asked.

"I'd love to," Phoebe said right away, packing her notes neatly into her bag.

"Phillip?"

I shrugged. "Not today. I've got too many things to do."

Truthfully, I was afraid that if I spent any time with Phoebe and Samson, they'd discover how boring I was.

"Alright. Tomorrow then?"

"Sure," I replied, happy to pass the commitment off to the future. "Tomorrow."

Samson and Phoebe shuffled out of the room ahead of me, and I lagged far enough behind to ensure I wouldn't cross paths with them. This made me one of the last to leave the room. As I passed by Anberlin's desk, he reached out to stop me.

"Hey, Phillip, a moment please."

My whole body tensed. What did I do wrong?

"I noticed you taking a lot of notes," he continued. "Thank you. You have a lot of potential. Keep it up."

With that, he lifted the handle of his briefcase and headed toward the door. I meant to say 'thanks', but instead, I stood silent and stunned. Nobody had ever told me I had potential before.

Was it really true?

If it was, I wasted a lot of potential that day on video games. Bedtime came later than before, and a million thoughts rolled through my mind as I

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tossed and turned in bed.

I didn't want to die, and I was beginning to worry that death was chasing me.

Chapter 12

The Girl of My Dreams

EVERYTHING WAS DARK, AND somehow, I recognized that I was dreaming. My breath was short as I shivered against a cold wind. As my eyes adjusted to the low light, the stars showed themselves, first in the sky and then in reflections against a body of water below me. I squinted and realized I was on a mountainside toeing the edge of a cliff.

My heart skipped, and I backed away. Safely in the middle of the plateau, I froze and gave my eyes time to adjust. As they did, the ambient blackness shifted to a grey-blue hue, and the details of nearby rocks faded into sight. Seeing my boundaries calmed me, and I drew a relaxing breath of thin, dry air. The air tickled the back of my throat, forcing me to hack into my elbow. My cough echoed around the landscape.

“Who’s there?”

A girl’s voice sounded from the darkness. There was a flash of orange light, and suddenly, I was staring at a fire that illuminated the entire plateau. It also lit the features of *her*. The girl. The girl from my dreams. The girl who had warned me about grandpa’s awakening. The girl who had advised me to run. Her hair was golden as ever, and her features were exactly as I remembered—sharp, defined, beautiful. The fire painted the contours of her face, and I watched the hard lines near her eyes soften as we recognized one another.

“Oh. It’s you,” the girl said.

We both stayed silent, not sure how to proceed. With fresh light shining upon the world, I took another look at my surroundings and found nothing but a steep drop in all directions. When I looked back at the girl, she gave me a look that suggested she’d made the same calculations.

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“Might as well settle in,” she muttered. With a wave, a pair of log benches appeared on either side of the fire, and she took a seat on one of them. Then she gestured for me to sit on the empty one.

I took a few steps forward, fighting the wobbly feeling in my legs. What was she doing here? Teddy assured me my room was protected from outside dreamers, so she couldn’t have been in Mandala. That meant she could have only come from one place, and the answer descended upon me like a cold fog.

She must’ve come from my imagination, and my imagination alone.

For a moment, I felt embarrassed for hoping she was real. And then the embarrassment faded. There was no need to be embarrassed; I was alone.

Still, this was a fascinating opportunity, and I embraced it by sitting on the log bench across from her. There, I processed my thoughts with the speed of an abacus. Every few seconds, I’d glance up at the girl and admire the way her blue eyes reflected the orangish hues of the fire. Then I’d avert my gaze back to the fire. Similarly, the girl sat perfectly still, though her face occasionally contorted with thought. Finally, after several long minutes, she broke the silence.

“Who are you?” she asked bluntly.

“I’m Phillip,” I said. “Who are you?”

“I’m just a girl trying to figure out how I keep getting lost in dreams.”

It took me a moment to process her response. It wasn’t what I’d been expecting.

“Oh, uh, I meant your name. What’s your name?”

She smirked and turned her head to the sky. Her hand lifted, and she waved it around the air. There, a spectacle of blue and green colors swept across the heavens, mimicking the pattern of the Northern Lights.

“My name is Aurora.”

The colors melted, and Aurora faced me.

“So, who are you?” she asked again, this time gentler. “And I *don’t* mean

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your name. I mean your deal. Why do I keep seeing you?”

Her question felt nonsensical amidst the context that *she* was inhabiting *my* dreams.

“I’m nobody. I promise.”

Aurora paused, considering my answer carefully. After a moment, she shrugged and looked away. “Fine. I’m sure it’ll come out eventually.”

I wanted to explain that I was telling the truth, but I didn’t think she’d believe me. We fell into a new silence, both of us lost in thought. Her eyes were locked on the fire where they remained pensive for a long minute. Finally, she shuffled in her seat and conjured a bag of marshmallows, a bar of chocolate, and a box of graham crackers. Carefully, she picked a marshmallow out of the bag and plucked it onto the end of a stick.

“S’more?” she asked, holding the stick out for me.

I nodded and accepted her offer.

“So. Phillip. The nobody.” She dipped her marshmallow over the fire so that the flames barely licked the outside. “What do you do?”

“Well, I, uh, I’m a student,” I mumbled, digging my stick into the heart of the fire.

“What are you studying?”

“I’m, uh, not entirely sure. I had my first class today and I’m not sure what it was about.” I hated how dumb I sounded. “What about you? What do you do?”

“What do I do?” She chuckled. “I’m dead.”

“What?”

She smiled wider.

“I’m oversimplifying, of course.” She rolled her marshmallow to brown it evenly. “Dead’s probably not the right word.”

Suddenly, I was a supercomputer moving through questions too fast to process any of them. Everything about her was so unexpected and unfamiliar

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that I had to meet it with awkward silence. I dug the marshmallow deeper into the flames and thought up a new question.

“How did you know Grandpa woke up?” I asked.

Without moving her head, her eyes lifted to meet mine. Then, she adjusted to look slightly past me. Her tongue pressed against the inside of her mouth, and she sighed.

“I don’t know,” she said, looking back at the fire. “I don’t know a lot of things.”

“But you knew Grandpa was awake,” I pressed. “How?”

“Sometimes, I hear voices talking around me. It’s like a hallucination. One voice mentioned something about your grandfather waking up, and they sounded panicked about what that meant for you. Putting two and two together, I thought it might be nice to let you know.”

“Is that it?” I asked, watching my marshmallow catch fire and rushing to blow it out.

“That’s it.” She shrugged. “If hearing ‘I don’t know’ a dozen times is frustrating, try saying it.”

I grunted in agreement and dragged my newly charred sludge onto a cracker.

“Well, thanks for the warning,” I said. “It saved my life.”

Aurora nodded and pulled her own marshmallow out of the flames. The golden-white puff on her stick was perfectly cooked, and it slid toward her hand, leaving a gooey trail in its wake. Very deliberately, she squeezed the marshmallow onto a graham cracker and topped the mess with chocolate. With a brief look in my direction, she took a delicate bite of the treat.

“It seems as though you can create anything,” I started. “Why bother with cooking a s’more if you could just create the perfect one from the start?”

Aurora chewed and swallowed, trying her best to be polite.

“Because I wasn’t trying to get to the s’more,” she said, wiping away the

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crumbs by her lips. “I was on a journey to get to know you better.”

I blushed, surprised by her response. Nobody had ever tried to get to know me before.

“Can you really create anything, though?”

“Just about,” she said, placing the rest of her s’more on the log beside her. “Try me. What would you like to see?”

“I don’t know. I’m not an idea person.”

“Just say something.”

I shrugged. “Uh, fireflies?”

In an instant, the plateau sprang alive with fireflies. They buzzed and glowed like fairies, filling the air with bristling amber energy.

“Give me another.”

My mind churned like static, and I forced a thought through. “Roses.”

“My favorite.” She twisted her fingers. Suddenly, a hundred roses sprang from the ground. Their crimson petals would’ve been beautiful enough, but the way they reflected the firefly light awed me.

“That’s amazing,” I said. “What’s the most difficult thing you can make?”

She thought before responding. “You’re asking the wrong question. I think I can make everything—but there’s more to my power than creation.”

“Well, what’s the right question then?”

“It’s, “what’s the thing I’m most proud to have figured out?”” She gave me a sly smile, begging me to ask.

I obliged. “So, Aurora—what’s the thing you’re most proud to have figured out?”

“I can fly.”

Aurora’s eyes narrowed as she focused on something internal. Slowly, her feet lifted from the ground, and she spread her arms like a magician who’d performed real magic.

I gave her a performative clap but held back bitter disappointment.

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Anberlin's lesson flashed through my mind. He said that flying wasn't possible in shared dreams because of the laws of physics. That meant this wasn't a shared dream.

Which you already knew, idiot, I chastised myself and felt like even *more* of an idiot for *still* hoping she might be real.

Aurora drifted back to the ground and landed like an autumn leaf.

"What's it like to fly?" I asked.

"I'll show you."

Before I could protest, Aurora grabbed my hand. Right away, my hair stood on end. Then a pillow of air inflated beneath my feet. And before I could register what was happening, we took flight. We'd barely ascended a foot before fear gripped me. *What am I doing?* I jerked my hand away. Instantly, the illusion snapped, and I tumbled to the ground.

"Ouch!" I clutched my ankles to soothe the pain.

"Are you okay?" Aurora asked, landing beside me like a block of iron.

"Yeah, I'll be fine," I said, wincing. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. What happened?"

"I panicked, I guess." I gave Aurora a pathetic look. "I don't like heights."

"Oh." Aurora pursed her lips and tilted her head. "Why?"

"Why?" I felt the answer was obvious. "Because falling means I could die."

"Oh, so you're afraid of death."

I looked at her like she was stupid. "Yeah. I'm afraid of death."

"I know an easy solution," she said.

"You do?"

"Yeah. Don't fall."

"I—"

I didn't have control over that outcome, was what I wanted to say, but I didn't want to tell her I didn't trust her. It was a fair thing to think, but it felt rude to

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say. There was a long pause, and I shrank away into the silence.

Aurora seemed to understand, however, and she took a seat next to me. Her head tilted back, and her eyes locked onto the stars.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

I said nothing. For several minutes, a flurry of thoughts bombarded me. Honestly, the situation was embarrassing on so many levels, and it was all I could do to process it. And to Aurora’s credit, she let me have my silence for a long while, and then she took it away.

“So, you said earlier that you’re a student.” Her tone was softer now, like the warmth of the campfire. “Is it like college or something?”

“I guess,” I said, my eyes looking out over the moon-bathed land. “I mean, I graduated high school two years ago, so you could say this is like college.”

“And what was that like?” Aurora asked. “High school.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I was homeschooled.”

Her answer surprised me—not because she was homeschooled, but because she mentioned having gone to school at all. If she was a part of my imagination, then why would she believe herself to be homeschooled?

“I only remember bits and pieces,” Aurora continued. For once, I saw her shrinking away. “My mother trained me to meditate while my father trained me to build. Thinking and doing classes, they called it.”

“No math? No history? No English? That sounds like fun.”

“It wasn’t. My parents were strict. Real strict. I was their golden child, which meant I had to be perfect. They expected a lot from me, and I pushed myself to the farthest extremes to please them. I thought they knew best, but as I got older, I realized they were just people. They had fears just as I did. Doubts like me. They were making everything up, just as we all do. It took me years to realize that, though some people know the future, they’ll still never

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grow to know the right thing to do.”

Her words were unnaturally reassuring. To hear her discuss *anyone* being lost, afraid, and insecure, let alone *everyone*, was a wonderful thing to hear, especially on the first day of my new classes. I’d always known it was stupid to believe my emotions were unique to me, but what was I supposed to believe when nobody else talked about them?

“So, anyway,” Aurora shook her head to clear the conversation, “what was high school like?”

“It was fine, I guess. I wasn’t a popular kid, or an athlete, or a nerd—I was just one of those kids that showed up, got my grade, and went home.”

“Did you have a bunch of classrooms and teachers and stuff?”

I answered her question, and she started asking more. How much time was between classes? Was there a physical bell the teachers rang? Was gym class traumatic? I answered everything in as much detail as I could until she asked something I didn’t know.

“What was homecoming like? I’ve heard people talk about it like it’s a big deal. Is it like the movies?”

“I, uh... I don’t know,” I admitted. Compulsively, my eyes peered over the edge of the cliffside. “I never went to homecoming.”

“What? Why not?”

Was there a good way to say that I never had the nerve to ask a girl to be my date? Was there another way to say that nobody would’ve gone with me if I’d asked in the first place?

“Because dancing is boring,” I said.

“Oh,” Aurora lowered her gaze. “I always thought those dances looked like fun. You get all dressed up and play with your friends. I don’t know. It seems so... so much like a part of the human experience. Like a moment in time you can only enjoy once, and after that, the opportunity is gone forever.”

“I, uh...” I didn’t know what to say. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I’m

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wrong about dances. I never went to one after all.”

“Maybe,” Aurora replied. “Maybe one day you’ll try it, and then know for sure.”

“Sure...”

“Ah, well, Phillip—it’s been fun.” Aurora pointed up to the sky where a large black void had absorbed most of the stars. “It was nice to finally meet you.”

“Yeah. Maybe we can talk again sometime.”

“I’d like that,” Aurora said. “I don’t have many friends. Or, well, *any* friends. I hope that can change.”

“Me too,” I said as the blackness overtook me. “See you next time.”



I bolted upright in my bed. My brain was tired, and my muscles felt stiff. As my eyes adjusted, I started looking at the wall across the room. For an hour, I stared as my mind ran through every detail of the dream. I wanted to commit it to memory, to recall even the smallest detail. Aurora might not be real, but after all this time, she was still with me. That made me want to know more.

When I finally returned to sleep, it was with the hope that I’d see Aurora again, but that was not the case. Instead, I remained asleep until my alarm rang several hours later for class. To my surprise, I woke with plenty of energy, excited to see Anberlin again.

Chapter 13

Lucid Dreaming

“PHILLIP, YOU NEED TO settle this,” Samson said, before I could even pull my notebook out. “Phoebe says we use all our brain all the time, but I say we use only ten percent of our brains at any given time. Who’s right?”

“It’s just a myth,” Phoebe said, exhausted. “Why would we have evolved such a large brain if we were only going to use a fraction of it?”

“Just because a supercomputer can use all its resources doesn’t mean it needs to,” Samson countered. “Besides, everyone’s heard of the ten percent rule. Phillip—tell her I’m right.”

I was about to explain that I didn’t know when Anberlin entered the room.

“Phoebe’s right,” Anberlin said, depositing a stack of folders on his desk. “We use every part of our brains in unison all the time for different things. The occipital lobe for sight, the temporal lobe for sound, the parietal lobe for touch, and the frontal lobe for your sense of self.” He touched the respective part of his head as he called out the name. “Each part of your mind has a role to play and unless you have specialized training, they’ll carry out their roles indiscriminately, guiding your actions and emotions on autopilot. Collectively, you use most of your brain all the time.”

Samson slumped, and Phoebe shot him a smug look. We thought he’d settled the argument, but Anberlin couldn’t refrain from continuing.

“Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the brain is that some lobes are competing with others over control of your actions. In this case, it wouldn’t be far-fetched to say that you use *too much* of your brain. Personally, my favorite interaction is the clash between the center brain and the frontal lobe. In psychoanalytic psychology, this is referred to as the battle between your id,

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ego, and superego. It's good philosophy—even if it's not the greatest psychology—but the core idea isn't nonsense. See, the center brain drives a lot of instinctual and social aspects of your personality, from your fear of snakes to your desire to follow social etiquette. In terms of utility, that's close to the idea of an id and superego. Then, when you consider that your frontal lobe is driving the core moral aspects of your personality, like honor and integrity... and..." His voice trailed away.

The whole class was staring vacantly.

"Sorry," Anberlin said. "Today, we're *not* discussing the neurological and philosophical underpinnings of the mind. Today, we're learning about lucid dreaming. Can anyone tell me what that is?"

A student in the front row raised their hand and gave a confident answer.

"Lucid dreaming is the process by which your conscious mind assumes control of your body during a dream," the student said.

"That's correct," Anberlin replied. "Knowing you're in a dream is the first step toward exploiting the rules of a dream, so it's the first thing you'll need to master. I'm about to turn on the mela gas to assist us in falling asleep. I recommend clearing your desks and finding a comfortable position to rest. Without further ado, let's begin."

Anberlin pushed a few buttons on the thermostat, and the air vents hummed to life. From the ceiling, a translucent gas settled upon us. With each breath, my head grew heavier and heavier, until finally, I collapsed into the fold of my arm.



The next thing I knew, I was thrust into a grassy field, lost in a haze with no

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idea where I was or what I was doing. I wandered around for a moment, moving aimlessly.

“Phillip,” a familiar voice called out my name.

I turned to face Samson, but my eyes had glazed over.

“Phillip?” Samson prodded, waving his hands in front of my eyes. “You’re dreaming.”

My mind snapped alive, and the fogginess in my brain dissipated. This sense of lucidness was short-lived, however, as I lost my awareness to the dream again. Automatically, I shuffled away.

“Hey there,” Anberlin said, blocking my path.

“Hi,” I mumbled, trying to sidestep him.

“You’re dreaming, Phillip,” Anberlin said. “You know that, right?”

“Yeah,” I replied, flat and distant. It was true. On some level, I knew I was dreaming. The problem was that my mind didn’t care, and it moved of its own accord.

“Take control, Phillip,” Anberlin pressed. “Overpower your instincts and move past your automatic motions. Be direct and intentional. Be *you*.”

As I struggled to find my own thoughts, my perception shifted. It was as though there was a tiny voice in the back of my mind shouting for my attention, but I was too far away to hear.

“Engage with logic,” Anberlin continued. “Ask yourself questions. How did I get here? What am I doing? Where am I going?”

My eyes scoured the grassy field. How *did* I get here? I couldn’t have walked. I couldn’t have flown. I couldn’t have driven. Where would I have come from? The last thing I remembered was...

The haze lifted. “I fell asleep in the classroom?”

“That’s right,” Anberlin said. “Now, go wait with the rest of the class.”

I nodded and scurried toward the other students. Halfway back, I got distracted and lost control again.

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“Samson, why don’t you assist him?” Anberlin suggested after a butterfly pulled me sharply off course.

“I’m on it.”

As Samson corralled me to the center of the field, Anberlin cordoned off each student one-by-one. It was proving to be a daunting task, however, as everyone was distracted by something or another. It took almost an hour to get the entire class together, seated, and focused.

“Alright,” Anberlin said. “How many of you are still lucid?”

About half the students raised their hands. I was one of them for about three seconds, and then my mind slipped, and I didn’t know why my hand was raised. I moved to stand, but Samson gripped my arm and kept me grounded.

“It’s a tough thing to balance your mind,” Anberlin said, nudging a different student who was staring a thousand yards away. “Lucid dreaming makes no sense. It’s an oxymoron to be conscious *and* unconscious. Yet here we are. I promise it gets better with practice. Until then, we need to catch ourselves as often as possible.”

I looked up at the sky, losing my focus. Beyond the clouds, there was a giant expanding void. With great pleasure, I watched the endpoint grow and grow until it swallowed the class whole.



I awoke with a sore neck and a red spot on my forehead. A small puddle of drool had amassed on my desk, which I rubbed away.

“So, how did everyone feel about that?” Anberlin asked, raising his eyebrows to stretch out his face. “Good?”

There was a mixed response.

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“Lucid dreaming can be fickle. Sometimes you’ll be completely aware for an entire dream, and sometimes you won’t be able to collect yourself at all. Don’t become discouraged if you never gained lucidity. You’ll have plenty of chances to succeed. Let’s go again.”

He moved to the thermostat again, and I nestled my head in my arm.



I swayed back and forth, finding my vision blurry. Loud noises blared as large objects sped past. An engine roared as an airplane sped past the runway and lifted into the air.

At first, I accepted this, finding nothing strange about being on a tarmac. But then, I questioned things.

How did I get here?

“You’re dreaming, Phil,” Samson said, tapping my shoulder.

I swore.

“I’ll get it next time,” I said. “I promise.”



I didn’t get it the next time, or the time after that. For the rest of class, I was lost, dazed, and confused, and by the end of class, I had difficulty knowing when I was *awake*, let alone asleep.

After a couple hours, Anberlin ended the class. After hours of bouncing back and forth between sleeping and waking, we were all desperate for a real bed.

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“Your homework is to practice lucid dreaming,” Anberlin said, turning on the lights. “The precognitors need this space tomorrow, so our next class won’t be until Thursday. I’ll see you then.”

With that, Anberlin snapped his briefcase shut and skirted out the door.

The rest of us were slow to follow. As I placed my notebook in my bag, a memory hit me. I’d agreed to spend time with Samson and Phoebe after class. Now that I was all light-headed—and now that it’d come time to hang out—I just wanted to be alone. I bolted to escape before their minds caught up with them, but I was too late.

“Hey, Phillip,” Samson said, catching me halfway to the door. “You still good to hang out today?”

I fumbled for words, looking for an excuse to go back to my room. But as my eyes landed on Phoebe, I reconsidered. She was smiling, and I felt like she genuinely wanted me to spend time with them. Without meaning to, my mouth opened, and I said:

“Yeah, I’m in.”

Chapter 14

The Library of Prophecies

I FOLLOWED PHOEBE AND Samson out the door, my jaw clenched and arms crossed. As the distance grew from Anberlin's classroom, I walked slower, betting they wouldn't notice if I fell too far behind and suddenly disappeared. But Phoebe slowed with me and refused to give me space to slip away.

"So, where do you want to go first?" she asked as Samson bounded ahead to lead the pack.

"Oh, I don't know," Samson said. "No preferences, really."

"How about the bowling alley?"

"Eh," Samson groaned and started walking backwards to talk with us.

"How about that theme park in Lucity?" I suggested.

"Nah... We went there yesterday."

"I was thinking about seeing something at the theater," Phoebe said.

"We can go to a theater anywhere," Samson said.

"It sounds like you have preferences after all," Phoebe said.

"I just want to go somewhere new."

"You grew up here. What haven't you seen already?"

"Well..." Samson rolled his head back and forth to ease into a risky suggestion. "I've never seen the precognitor's library. Maybe we can go there?" By his tone, it was clear he'd been wanting to ask this for a while.

I held back a bit of laughter. I'd almost forgotten Phoebe was an oracle, not a dream sharer. I'd seen enough coalescence to know that people could share dreams, but dreaming the future? That was a line too far.

"Level Three? The Library of the Prophets?" Phoebe waffled. "I'm not

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sure I'm allowed to bring guests.”

“There’s a person at the front desk, right?” Samson shrugged. “If we’re not supposed to be down there, they’ll be the first to let us know.”

“I don’t know...”

“What do you think, Phil?” Samson asked. “Want to see the prophecies?”

“I guess,” I said.

Samson gave me a funny look. “You’re not interested?”

“I don’t believe in fortune telling,” I said. I regretted my tone when Phoebe shot me a disgusted look.

“It’s *not* fortune-telling,” she said. “It’s precognition.”

“That’s the same thing, isn’t it?”

“It’s not,” Samson said. “Fortune-telling is a party trick. Precognition is... different.”

“Oh, come on. You too?” My face was growing red. “You don’t really believe people can dream the future, do you?”

“Don’t ask him,” Phoebe spat. “Ask me. I’m the one who does it.”

“Okay, fine,” I said, my blood pumping harder. “Prove it. Let’s go find a bed and you can dream the future for me.”

“It doesn’t work like that,” Phoebe said, flustered.

“Yeah. Don’t you know anything about precognition?” Samson asked.

“No, I don’t, okay? I don’t know anything about coa— coalesce— dream sharing, and I don’t know anything about precognition. I’ve been in this world for less than a week and everything is... is... *crazy*, okay? Apparently, people in dreams can kill me. Apparently, there are terrorists I’m supposed to be fighting. Apparently, there’s a *human brain* underground, and we treat it like it’s a Minecraft server. Like, what? And on top of all that, you want me to believe you can dream the future?”

There was a long, tense pause.

“If you already know all that to be true,” Phoebe started, her voice

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strikingly calm, “then why is *this* so hard to believe?”

“Because...” I stole a breath and quieted. “Because I don’t want to believe my whole life is a predetermined mess. Look, I lost my whole family two years ago to... to... I don’t know. My dad died of an aneurysm. My mom disappeared. My grandpa fell into a coma. And now, two years later, my grandpa wakes up just to disappear again. I’d much rather believe everything’s random, because if fate’s real, why is it torturing me like this?”

There was a long, simmering silence. Phoebe looked at me, her eyes a mirror that reflected my sorrow. We shared a moment, and it took everything in me to hold back tears. Phoebe opened her mouth and drew a breath to speak, when—

“What are you talking about?” Samson said. “Fate’s not out to get you. It’s blind. It just... does its thing.”

Phoebe shot him a horrified expression.

“What?” Samson looked at me for reassurance. “Fate isn’t calculated or directed. It just... happens.”

“You’re right, but that’s a little insensitive, don’t you think?” Phoebe said.

“It’s the truth, and truth doesn’t care about insensitivities.”

“Look, I’m sorry,” I mumbled, wiping mist from the corner of my eyes. “Maybe I’m just overwhelmed, that’s all.”

Phoebe touched my arm, and I tensed. “No, it’s fine. I’ll tell you what—I’ll take you down to Level Three, but if Dr. Delphi stops us, the adventure ends there, okay?”

“Sounds good,” Samson said. “Phillip?”

“Yeah, sure,” I said, avoiding eye contact.

“Okay, let’s go.”

As Phoebe turned to lead us to the elevator, Samson shot me a wink. I thought better of addressing it and lagged behind to collect myself.

“So, Phoebe,” Samson started, “can I ask you a question? How do you

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know you're dreaming the future when it's happening?"

Phoebe shrugged. "It's just intuition."

"So, it's like an educated guess?"

"No, it's not a guess at all. I *know* when I'm having a precognitive dream. It's like... you know that feeling when you wake up from a dream and only vaguely remember what happened?"

"Yeah." Samson and I nodded.

"Well, it's the opposite of that. I remember *every detail* of a prophetic dream—for a few hours at least. After that, the dream fades. That's why it's so important to have precognitors on staff. Whenever I dream, I have to bring my prophecy to Dr. Delphi as fast as I can."

"She the one at the front desk, right?" Samson asked.

"Yeah. She's been the librarian for decades. Knows where every file is located and what it says. She can draw connections from all across the world to deduce exactly what's going to happen next. When Mandala needs to know their next step, they come to her first."

"And she tells them what to do?"

"Not necessarily," Phoebe said. "She tells Teddy what's going to happen so the commanding officers can plan Mandala's next move."

I listened politely, trying my hardest to believe this was real—but this was where I got hung up. If someone dreams the future and the commanding officers use that information to avoid that future, then how would we know the initial person was dreaming the future? It was a paradox, and I was ready to pounce on her mistake.

"Hypothetically," I started, "if you dreamt you were going to die in a car crash, why would you get in the car?"

"Because fate's already accounted for the knowledge it's given," Phoebe said, immediately bored by my question. "Once fate has decided something will happen, it's as good as done."

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“No, like, let’s say you have a dream where—”

“Let me give you an example of how this works,” Phoebe interjected, stopping just shy of the elevator doors. “This was, I don’t know, maybe my third premonition. I was at school and my teacher was passing back a test I hadn’t yet taken. When I got my paper, I saw that I had failed. After waking, do you know what I did?”

“You studied?”

“Oh yeah,” Phoebe said. “I studied a *lot*. I took pages and pages of notes, made hundreds of flashcards, and memorized every word of the textbook. My anxiety was through the roof. I was so worried about this test that I stayed up all night to cram a little more. And do you know what happened the next day?”

Samson and I shook our heads.

“I overslept,” Phoebe said. “I arrived late to class and didn’t have time to finish the test.”

“That sucks,” Samson said.

“No—what sucks is that I would’ve passed the test if I’d never had the dream.”

“That’s a paradox, isn’t it?”

“Oh yes, the bootstrap paradox.” Phoebe laughed. “If knowing the future changes the future—and I’m only shown an altered future—then where does the information come from? It turns out that fate isn’t some bystander watching us play in a sandbox; it’s an author writing our stories. It’s an entity in and of itself. Fate is alive. It takes all the variables—including the knowledge of knowledge itself—and forces a predetermined outcome. It doesn’t matter that you *think* you can beat fate; you can’t. That’s the simple truth, and it drives people insane.”

“So, what’s the point?” I asked. “Why have a library collecting prophecies?”

“Because not all failures are equal,” Phoebe said. “Think about my case. I

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could've accepted fate and done nothing to fight against it, but that wouldn't have helped me. I could've refused to study and received the same test grade. But instead, I fought fate and earned something: knowledge. I'm a better person for having tried my best, even if I didn't win. So, Mandala doesn't collect prophecies to change destiny just as a sailor doesn't use a compass to overpower the wind; they only wish to steer the ship in a direction. And if you get blown off course, you work hard to course correct. That's what we're doing here."

"Alright, I'm lost," Samson said. "And you can't catch me up because I'm just not interested." He leaned forward and pressed the elevator's call button.

"Okay, I'll stop," Phoebe said, chuckling at Samson. "Phillip, if you want to learn more about precognition, come audit tomorrow's class."

"Yeah," I said. "I think I might."

The elevator arrived, and we stepped inside. Phoebe put her key card into the slot and pressed the button for Level Three.

"Now, remember," Phoebe said, "we go to the desk and ask Dr. Delphi for a tour. Nothing more."

"Got it," Samson said.

"And when she says no," Phoebe continued, her tone grave, "we leave without bargaining."

"Hmm?" Samson tilted his head dramatically.

"No bargaining," Phoebe reiterated.

"No what?"

"*No bargaining.*"

"Sorry, I can't understand you." Samson mouthed her words to himself, bungling them up.

"Ugh."

The elevator stopped, and the doors cracked open. A waft of stale air bombarded me, and I squinted in the darkness. Level Three was an enchanting

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mix of a library and a storage facility. The room was lit with fake candles breathing orange light in a soothing rhythm over rows and rows of filing cabinets. The walls of the foyer obscured the true size of the room, but I could tell it was massive. To the side sat a desk with an empty chair, a smattering of papers covering every inch of the surface. As I gazed around, it dawned on me that maybe, *just maybe*, this was for real. At the very least, it seemed unlikely that Mandala would invest so much money in a hoax. The elevator doors *whirred* shut behind us, and the mechanical nature of it contrasted with the old-fashioned library, leaving me tight and unsettled.

“It’s musty,” Samson said, stepping forward. “And old-fashioned.”

“We’re in the world’s largest prophetic library and *that’s* your take?”

“I have the same opinion of the Vatican, so don’t take it personally,” Samson said. “So, where’s the doctor?”

“She’s usually there.” Phoebe gestured at the empty desk.

“Weird,” Samson said, his airy tone conveying how little this fact concerned him. “Well, the library’s open. Let’s have a look around.”

Samson ventured deeper and peered around the first wall, obviously searching for a sign of Dr. Delphi. When the coast was clear, he took a step past the threshold.

“Samson, stop,” Phoebe said, panicked. “We should wait.”

Samson peeked around the bend and flashed a huge smile. Then, he ducked back out of sight and disappeared again.

“Ugh, I can’t stand him,” Phoebe said—smiling. She rushed up to where Samson had disappeared.

While she was distracted, I looked over the papers on Dr. Delphi’s desk. Dozens of files were haphazardly strewn about, lying on top of the manila folder they belonged to. My heart thumped as I reached over and pulled the folder out to read the label: *Thanatos’ Return*.

Thanatos?

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I'd heard the name before—recently I knew—but couldn't remember where.

I dropped the folder and scanned the papers. They were full of dark material. Death, blood, gore—the kinds of things I didn't want to read too much about; the kinds of things I couldn't stop reading.

“Are these prophecies?” I asked.

But Phoebe didn't answer. She had her head around the wall, eyeing Samson and fighting the urge to chase after him.

“Don't go too far,” she warned, her voice echoing softly. “You could get us in trouble.”

“Dr. Delphi would be at her desk if it was that important,” Samson said, his voice quite distant by now. “Come on. We couldn't *possibly* get in trouble for looking at *your* file.”

Phoebe stood still, but after a moment of deliberation, she whipped around the corner. I heard her footsteps bounce around the room as she jogged toward him.

Suddenly, I was alone in a room I wasn't supposed to be in with a strict librarian that could come back at any time. This was *not* where I wanted to be. I left the papers at the desk and ran after them both. Samson flashed a smile as I matched their pace.

“Alright. So... Phoebe Vedas...” Samson said, looking up at the alphabetical labels. “V-E-D... with an ‘a’ or an ‘e’?”

“An ‘a’...” Phoebe said, annoyed. Deeper in her voice, though, were notes of excitement.

Samson darted down a row of filing cabinets, brushing his finger along the dust-covered drawers, until finally—

“Found it,” Samson said, stopping in front of a cabinet with Phoebe's name on it. He yanked the drawer open revealing a stack of manila folders packed so tightly that it was impossible to stick a finger between any two sheets

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of paper. The whole ream looked well-worn and ragged.

“Let’s find your first dream,” Samson said, flipping through the labels. “The one that landed you the job here.”

“No, stop it. We shouldn’t be here.”

“Do you remember what it was about?” Samson asked.

“I—” Phoebe paused and shook her head. “It was a long time ago. Come on, let’s go back.”

“Don’t you *want* to remember what it was about?”

Phoebe smiled devilishly, and suddenly, she was all-in. Together, they bent over the cabinet and skimmed over folders.

“*Armed Robbery?*” Samson asked, picking out a thick packet.

“No...” Phoebe said.

“This one’s titled *Medical Emergency?*” Samson picked out another folder.

“That’s an old one, but no,” Phoebe said, looking nervously over her shoulder.

“Hold on,” Samson said. “I think I found it.”

We all went silent as he pulled out a faded file. On the front, handwritten, was the title of her dream: *The Death of Hubert Wolfe*.

Chapter 15

The Death of Hubert Wolfe

MY SKIN PRICKLED, AND my mouth dried out. I didn't realize it right away, but my hands had curled into fists.

"Hey, Phillip," Samson started, "did you know him? He's got the same last name as you."

"Yeah," I said darkly. "That was my father."

We sank into silence, trying to figure out what it meant, when a stern voice sounded from the end of the hall.

"You're not allowed back here."

We all jumped back from the filing cabinet. At the end of our corridor stood a woman. She was small and mousy with a tense demeanor. Her hair was unnaturally dark and straight, hanging just above her shoulders. She stared at us coldly; we stared back like dogs caught sifting through trash.

"Dr. Delphi—" Phoebe started.

"This area is restricted," Dr. Delphi interjected, her voice cold and without inflection.

"We were reading my old files," Phoebe said.

"Once submitted, your dreams become property of Mandala," Dr. Delphi said. "That means you were reading *my* old files. In other words, you're trespassing."

"I-I'm s-sorry." Phoebe started tearing up.

"I don't care. Let's go find out how Teddy would like to punish you."

Dr. Delphi turned on her heel and took her first step toward the lobby. With my head hung low, I followed her lead, but Phoebe and Samson lagged behind. For a moment, they exchanged sharp whispers, but their nearly silent

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argument was cut short by the beckoning of Dr. Delphi.

“*Let’s go.*”

Phoebe slammed the file drawer shut and glared at Samson. Then we followed Dr. Delphi to the lobby where she gathered up folders before calling the elevator. As we waited, she arranged the files in her hand. When the elevator came, she tucked the files under her arm and shook her head, not yet satisfied with the collection.

As the elevator ascended, I gathered my thoughts. *Why would Phoebe dream of my father’s death?*

I remembered my dad’s death clearly, as uneventful as it was. The autopsy reported a misfire in the brain during sleep. It was a quiet, natural, peaceful way to die. It was as mundane as a death could be. So why did Phoebe—a stranger to my family—dream about his death?

The elevator doors opened, and it was a short walk to Teddy’s office. My skin burned as I thought about our impending punishment. What if I got expelled? Grandpa promised I would be safe here, but if I wasn’t allowed to stay, how would I survive? Would I be hunted down? Tortured? Killed?

Dr. Delphi knocked twice on Teddy’s door and let herself in. Teddy was sitting at his desk, reading something on his monitor. As we approached, he removed his glasses and perked up. His eyes swept from Dr. Delphi down to Phoebe, Samson, and me, then back to Dr. Delphi. Slowly, his expression faded.

“It’s nice to see you all,” Teddy said, choosing his words carefully. “Mrs. Delphi, how can I help you?”

“For the last time, it’s *Doctor* Delphi.”

“Very well, doctor. What’s the diagnosis?”

Dr. Delphi cleared her throat and fought back a sneer. “I found these three snooping in the library.”

“What’s wrong with a few kids using the library?” Teddy said. “Isn’t that

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the dream of all teachers? To find their students in the library?”

“I found them in my library,” Dr. Delphi replied. Though her voice was neutral, she was furiously tapping the folder in her clutched hand.

“Oh, hmm...” Teddy rubbed his chin as though he were thinking things through, but it was overdone and performative. “I don’t think any of them knew the area was restricted.”

Phoebe opened her mouth, ready to admit to everything, but Teddy cut her off.

“That *must* be it.” Teddy buried his head in his hand. “It’s my fault, Mrs. Delphi. I didn’t give any of them a proper tour.” He turned toward us and gave an exaggerated look that said: *forgive me*. “Don’t go back to the library, okay?”

We nodded in agreement. And confusion.

“Good, now that that’s settled, I have just one question.” Teddy fixed his eyes on Dr. Delphi. “How did they get past *you*?”

Dr. Delphi scowled. Then she caught herself and forced her expression back to its empty state.

“If you must know, I was in the back, cross-referencing dreams.” Dr. Delphi tossed the folder titled *Thanatos’ Return* onto Teddy’s desk. “You might want to take a look.”

The color drained from Teddy’s face, and for several long seconds, the room was silent.

“Dr. Delphi,” Teddy started. “You don’t think...?”

“I do.”

“But how?”

Dr. Delphi shrugged. “Perhaps Henry Wolfe would know. Have you found him yet?”

My heart beat a little harder, and I listened a little closer.

“No,” Teddy said. He mulled it over a moment before turning to me.

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“Phillip, this is very important. Do you know where Henry is hiding?”

I wanted to speak, but I had nothing to say. I shook my head.

“Are you sure?” Teddy pressed. “Let me be clear. There are lives at stake. If you know anything regarding your grandfather’s whereabouts, now would be a good time to remember.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I don’t know anything.”

“Very well,” Teddy said, turning to other matters. “Dr. Delphi, have a seat. The rest of you are free to leave.”

Samson, Phoebe, and I exchanged glances.

“*Now.*”

Our feet shuffled out the door, and we crammed through the doorway all at once. Nobody said a word until we were most of the way down the hall and well out of earshot. Then, Samson chuckled.

“See, Phoebe—I told you,” Samson said. “You gotta trust me.”

“It was unnecessary,” Phoebe whispered. “You should’ve left it.”

“Left what?” I asked.

Samson gave a sly smile and pulled the manila folder out from under his shirt. The one about my dad.

“Don’t wave it around out here,” Phoebe whispered—though her whisper was so loud she’d have been better off speaking normally. She pushed Samson’s arm down and glanced around to make sure nobody spotted them.

“How’d you get it?” I asked.

“When that librarian turned around, I pocketed it.”

“Shush, stop.” Phoebe took another swipe at the folder, but Samson was quick to pull it out of reach.

“Do you want to read it?” Samson asked.

“That’s not yours to share,” Phoebe said.

“Yes,” I said. “I want to know what happened.”

To my words, Phoebe stopped and turned to me. She eyed me carefully,

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and her lips pursed as she considered things.

“He has a right to know,” Samson said, staring Phoebe down.

“Shut up. I know that,” she said.

“Then let him see it.”

There was a longer pause as Phoebe considered the rules and, with a sigh, she forced herself to ignore them.

“Fine,” Phoebe said. “Tuck it away and follow me.”

Phoebe bolted toward the stairs, and we descended to the dormitory floor. After winding around a few corridors, we arrived at Phoebe’s room. It was nice and well organized, with a wonderfully made bed and a neat stack of books. Samson took a seat on the edge of the mattress, crinkling the sheets. Phoebe pretended this didn’t annoy her (though it was all over her face), and she sat across from him in a reading chair. I took the seat by the desk and faced them both.

Ceremoniously, Samson placed the folder in my hands, and I stared at the cover for a long time. Samson waited patiently, saying nothing.

“You don’t have to read it, you know,” Phoebe said. “I don’t remember what’s in it. Fate doesn’t generally show me ordinary events, so when someone dies...”

I read the title over and over again as though I’d glean more information out of it if I stared at it longer. The truth was, however, that the only new information would come from the first page, so I flipped open the cover and read.

~

File Overview:

Expected Date of Fulfillment: Unknown (3+ years).

Subject Keywords: Death—Thanatos—Hubert—Cassandra—Serenity—Transcendence.

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Dreamer: Vedas, P.

Transcribed by: Delphi, J.

Summary: A graveyard, mid-afternoon. Thanatos threatens the life of Hubert over a concept called Serenity (?), and Cassandra over a concept called Transcendence (?). Cassandra runs. Hubert fights. There's a short scuffle, and Hubert is stabbed, killed. Dream fades.

Prophecy Fulfilled: [Redacted]

Note: Unredacted files can be found in the Situation Room in Lucity.

CASE CLOSED.

~

Less than a hundred words was all it took to tell the story of how my father died. Just a single sheet of paper. I skimmed it at first and then read it again more carefully.

“You alright, Phil?” Samson asked.

I wasn't sure. After all these years of believing that my father died comfortably in his sleep, it finally came out that he died a horrible death. Of all the things I'd learned this week, this was the worst.

“I'm sorry,” I said, dropping the paper onto the desk and standing. “I have to go.”

“Wait—” Samson stood, but I was already gone out the door. He looked between the door and Phoebe, frowning. And then he raced out of the room after me.

Phoebe, however, remained frozen. She sat at the edge of her bed and stared into space. This was the dream she'd tried for years to forget—but it

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had always clung to her. And now, the paper had triggered an echo of that trauma. She stared at the wall and waited for the feelings to pass the hard way.

Chapter 16

Phoebe's First Prophecy

Twelve Years Earlier

Phoebe Vedas

SIX-YEAR-OLD PHOEBE Vedas giggled. It was the night of her birthday, and she was excited to spend time with all her new gifts: a dozen stuffed animals. Her arms and legs were stiff as she wobbled from one toy to the next in a fervor to play with them all at the same time. Phoebe's mom watched with a smile, beaming.

"What are you doing?" Mom asked in that playful tone that begged to be invited in on the fun.

"I'm a penguin," Phoebe said. "I want them to think I'm an animal too, so they feel good in their new home." She pointed at the pile of her new toys, who, by the nature of their construction, looked quite happy to have been adopted by such a loving owner.

"That's sweet," Mom said, "but it's time for bed."

"Aww, but I haven't played with all of them yet. If I don't play with all of them, they'll think I have favorites." She leaned in close and whispered, "I do, but don't tell them that."

Mom sighed, exaggerating it for show. "Alright. I suppose the birthday princess gets to pick her own bedtime."

"I can stay up until night-noon?" Phoebe asked, eyes gleaming.

"You can stay up until *midnight*," Mom corrected gently.

Young Phoebe squealed and raced around the room, her penguin fins becoming the wings of an airplane.

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“Can Holly and Katelyn come?” Phoebe asked, hopeful her younger sisters could join the late-night party.

“They’re already asleep,” Mom replied. “So, you’ll have to keep it quiet.”

“Okay. What should I do for the animals, then?” Phoebe asked. “I want to do something with everyone all at once.”

“Maybe you could throw them a tea party?”

“With ice cream?” Phoebe looked up with wide, hopeful eyes.

“With ice cream, yes.”

“Tea and ice cream! Tea and ice cream!”

“Shhh,” Mom hushed. “Katelyn *just* fell asleep. We don’t want to wake her.”

“Sorry,” Phoebe tried to whisper, but it came out as a softly spoken word. She still didn’t quite understand what it meant to whisper. “Do we still have ice cream, though?”

“Not since you ate it all.”

“That’s okay. Stuffed animals don’t need real ice cream, right?”

“That’s right. They need imaginary ice cream.”

Young Phoebe nodded vigorously before retrieving a plastic pail from the corner of her room. With her tiny hands, she scooped imaginary ice cream out of the bucket and served each animal individually, letting them know how much they deserved their treat. When she finished, she circled around and pulled on Mom’s pants.

“Want some?” she asked, holding the empty pail up for Mom to see.

“Absolutely.”

“You have to be an animal to get some, though. I’m a penguin. What are you?”

“I’ll be a dog,” Mom said, lowering her body to the ground so she could trounce about on all fours. Little Phoebe accepted this and served her mother a fake scoop of vanilla alongside an imaginary cup of tea. Together, they asked

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Mr. Elephant about his day, helped Mr. Teddy become friends with Mrs. Snake, and saved Mr. Wolf from falling off the table. The shenanigans carried on until Phoebe let out a massive yawn.

“Alright, little lady,” Mom started, clambering to her feet. “It’s now *past* midnight, which means it’s not your birthday anymore. Time for bed.”

Phoebe scrambled to her feet and gave her mom a bear hug. Then she wobbled down the hall, climbed into bed, and gripped the top sheet with both hands. Mom pulled the comforter over Phoebe and kissed her forehead.

“You’ve grown so fast,” Mom said, rubbing her hand over her daughter’s back.

“Did you want me to stop growing?” Phoebe asked, sure she could give it a try.

“No, no,” Mom said. “I want you to grow bigger and stronger as best as you can, okay?”

“Okay,” Phoebe mumbled, her eyes growing heavier. “I’ll do that.”

“Good. I’ll see you in the morning. Night, sweetheart.”

“Night, Mommy...” Phoebe murmured, just as she drifted into a dream.



Young Phoebe’s dream started in a vast meadow. Feeling like this was a birthday gift from the universe, Phoebe stomped around joyously, careful not to trample anything beautiful—especially not the hibiscus flowers.

She moved in bliss, chasing a bunny into a bush, and when the rabbit found a hidey-hole, Phoebe stopped to draw in a breath just as Mom always did when *she* felt happy. She wanted to be just like Mom, and one day, she knew she would be. In this euphoria, Phoebe stretched out her arms and let

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the world imbue her with energy.

The breeze gave a perfect tug, and with it came the most amazing smells. She could practically taste the sugar from the apples that grew in a nearby grove; could almost see the honeycombs that hung from their branches. The peaceful nature of things slipped into her body, and as she absorbed the universe, she felt incredible.

And then something changed. A cold, dreadful feeling spread through her body. Like a reverse Pandora's Box, she'd been open for too long, and all the good things had blown right past her. Now, all that remained was an ick that trickled down her spine. Venom pumped through her veins, and all at once, she was no longer six-year-old Phoebe; she was a vessel of the universe, a puppet to fate.

Unable to resist, Phoebe started jogging, then running, then sprinting. She was the best runner in her grade, but this thought didn't cross her mind as she trampled over flowers and swept past the orchard to get to where the universe commanded her to be. No thought crossed her mind. She ran for miles, never losing breath, and only stopped once she came across a graveyard. It was here, in the ruins of the cemetery, that she was compelled to stop.

The world hung in a limbo of twilight, casting a perpetual shadow over the land. This was a place that was intentionally chosen—possibly even hand-crafted—to remind one of their mortality. It reeked of death.

But Phoebe was unperturbed. She stood at the edge of the field and stared at three people—two men and one woman. The men were staring down one another with narrow eyes, squared shoulders, and aggressive postures. The woman was farther back, quivering in fear, her back pressed against a tombstone.

"I'm sorry, Thanatos," one man said. "Simon left us with no choice. Just let it be. I beg you."

"You think I'm here because of Simon?" Thanatos scoffed. "You're

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foolish, Hubert. I'm not here for vengeance. I'm here to kill Cassandra. Now move."

"Thanatos, please," Hubert said. "There must be some arrangement we can come to."

There was a dense silence. The only sound was of Phoebe whispering to herself, but nobody on the field seemed to notice her.

"Perhaps," Thanatos said. "Perhaps there *is* a path in which I spare her, but it doesn't take a precognitor to know you'll never agree to it."

"Just tell us what you want," Hubert said. "Anything."

"Well," Thanatos began, "a coalescent powered by serenity is a dangerous enemy. Should you succeed, Hubert, you will undoubtedly become stronger than any man alive by clarity of mind alone. And yet, your power would still pale against Cassandra's transcendence. With transcendence, she would become a million times more dangerous than anything the world has ever known. She's tampering with the very fabric of fate, and I will not let her cut a single strand from that perfect tapestry. Not without my oversight."

"Okay, we'll stop," Hubert said, his hands held straight out before him. "We'll put aside our ambitions and live a quiet life. I swear it."

Thanatos shook his head, slow and resigned. "Your word is no good to me, and your proposal is not what I desire. What I want is for you to join the Night Corps. Serve me and my mission. Save the world with *us*."

"What?"

"I'll protect you," Thanatos continued, "and your efforts will serve to bring world peace to the deserving. Your powers combined will chisel a second age of enlightenment and forge a new pantheon of gods. And each of you will have a seat at the round table of thrones."

"No," Hubert said, his voice a hoarse whisper. "I know of your plan for world peace, and it's not exactly what I'd call peace. A rule through fear and murder? I'll have no part in that."

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“Even the most compassionate know God needed hell to make heaven.”

“No,” Hubert whispered. “We won’t do it.”

“I know,” Thanatos said plainly. “I’ve always known. So I offer one last concession. Step aside, and I’ll let you live. You can go home. Care for your son. Live a normal life. Serenity is personal. Discreet. Isolated. It won’t affect me the way transcendence would. But transcendence would affect everything. It would unravel the universe. The only one who must die is Cassandra, and if you stand in my way, you’re only going to be a casualty in protecting her.”

“Then I’ll be a casualty.”

With these words, Hubert softened. There was a comfort that came with the certainty that one was about to die. No longer was it important to consider the clothes left in a dryer, the debt on a credit card, or the things left unsaid. Instead, he only had to worry about one thing: taking so long to die that Cassandra had a chance to survive.

Thanatos relaxed in much the same way. There was a comfort that came with the certainty that one was about to kill. No longer was it important to consider the morality of his actions, the events that led him here, or the words that might’ve changed things. Instead, he only had to worry about one thing: killing a person so fast he could stop a resistance before it formed.

Thanatos stretched out his hand, and a silver scythe flickered into his grasp. He waved it around his body and adjusted the balance before turning back to Hubert. When he spoke next, his words were dripping with solemnity.

“I will gift you a moment to say goodbye.”

Hubert eyed Thanatos suspiciously.

“I mean it,” Thanatos said. “Have your final moment and cherish it. I may not understand love, but I know the idea of it.” He paused. “Consider this my only mercy.”

Hubert turned to face Cassandra. There was a silent understanding between them.

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“I love you,” he said.

“I love you too,” Cassandra said, grasping her husband’s hand and interlacing their fingers. “Don’t do this.”

“If only one of us is to survive, it has to be you.”

“And then what? I go on knowing you’re dead for my sake?” She placed a hand on Hubert’s cheek. “I want to live together or die together. Nothing else would be right.”

“And what about others?” Hubert asked. “Thanatos will kill millions of people, lovers like us. He’ll strip them of everything. Transcendence is the only thing that can beat him. *You* are the only one who can beat him.”

Cassandra drew a breath so shallow she might as well have held her breath.

“You’re right,” she said. “Okay. I love you.”

“I love you so much.” Hubert squeezed her hand. “Now run.”

Cassandra twisted her body and sprinted toward the trees, jumping over gravestones on her path to safety. Thanatos watched, refusing to give chase. Instead, he focused on Hubert.

“Are you ready?” Thanatos asked, lifting his scythe and pointing across the field.

“I am,” Hubert replied, turning to face his opponent only once his wife was out of sight. With the moment he’d been given, his mind focused inward, and his brain sifted through suitable weapons. Anything ranged would do against a scythe—which was unsettling. Why would Thanatos allow himself to be at such an obvious disadvantage? But it didn’t matter. Even if there was a trick at play, Hubert’s best option was to keep his distance.

He decided on a handgun. It popped into the air, and he snatched it with one hand. Habitually, his finger defaulted to the outside of the trigger guard, and for a flash, he worried this would give Thanatos an opening. But Thanatos did not move. Hubert settled in and forced his finger over the trigger. He

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pulled. **Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang-bang**— So many shots were fired that he lost count of what was left in his magazine. And all the while, Thanatos did not flinch. Hubert pulled harder on the trigger, and when the pin clicked against an empty chamber, he peered through the smoke to see what damage he had done.

Nothing.

After all that, Thanatos remained standing, not a drop of blood on his chest.

“H-How?”

Thanatos dug his foot into the ground. With a shunt, he bolted forward, closing the gap between them in a blink. Hubert darted to his left, but amid a moment of stunned hesitation, he couldn’t avoid Thanatos’s strike. The reward for being caught off-guard was a gash across his abdomen and a donation of blood to the dirt.

Hubert stumbled backward and scrambled to hold his guts inside his body. There was a flash as a bandage appeared around his stomach, and he staggered to regain his balance.

Six-year-old Phoebe watched and continued her whispers. “Hubert receives a cut on his stomach, loses blood, bandages wound...”

Hubert looked between the bandage and Thanatos, his eyes unable to hide his fear. In this moment, a simple truth rang through him. Most animals wouldn’t willingly fight something stronger than them—that was a feat reserved for humans. But when cornered and facing death, animals would do *anything* to survive. And humans, for all their evolution, were still animals.

Thanatos stepped forward, and Hubert’s mind became its own monster. In a moment of instinct, he withdrew a bomb from his imagination. It was a sloppy construction that, once kicked, landed between the two men and exploded immediately. A hot flash swept across Hubert’s body, and even with his hands held before his eyes, he endured a rash of burns. Half his face was

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charred away, but adrenaline saved him from the pain.

Still, this was not enough. From the smoke and shadows, a weaponless Thanatos emerged, charging like a bull. He dipped his shoulder and slammed into Hubert, sending the man flying into an obelisk gravestone. His head gashed open, and his ears rang with pain. He reached up to feel the blood and immediately regretted it.

Thanatos smirked. When he next approached Hubert, it was with the calmness of a lion approaching an injured gazelle. The only option left for Hubert was to flail one last time. He forced himself up and lunged for Thanatos's neck. His hands wrapped around the jugular, and his thumbs pressed with as much force as they could muster. But the god's skin did not budge. Not an inch. Not a millimeter. Not at all. It was worse than pressing into steel.

"You did it," Hubert whispered, staring at Thanatos in disbelief. "You became invincible."

"Just about."

In a flash, Thanatos snatched Hubert's wrist, bent his arm back, and snapped it at the elbow. It *crunched*, and Hubert crumpled to the ground. There, Thanatos stepped on him, pinning his face to the sand.

And young Phoebe continued to watch. To whisper.

"Hubert, my old friend. You should've joined me." A new scythe grew in Thanatos's hand, and he held the blade against Hubert's throat. "Your moral compass fails to point you in the direction of necessity. You miss the love behind my killings. I'm a fair man, and I gave you a fair choice. I'm sorry, I truly am. But you should've joined me."

Hubert gargled and spat out blood.

"My wife... will find... transcendence," Hubert gasped. "And you'll pay for—"

Thanatos drove the blade of his scythe through Hubert's skull. The father

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tensed, then slumped. A moment later, his corpse faded, evaporating to the wind. Only a puddle of blood remained as proof of his existence.

“What a waste,” Thanatos grumbled, spitting light-pink saliva. He dropped his weapon, and blood splattered on his boot. With a series of breaths, he collapsed and stared at the sky. “What a goddamned waste.”

Phoebe could not stop muttering amid her possession, though a tear had found its way onto her cheek. “Thanatos sat, stared at the sky, spoke to himself...”

In the fading light of the dream, Thanatos’s eyes drifted toward Phoebe. And then there was darkness.



Young Phoebe snapped up in her bed. She took a long, deep inhale and screamed. The door opened, slamming against the wall.

“What’s wrong?” Mom asked, rushing in. “What happened?”

“I-I had a b-b-bad dream,” Phoebe blurted, her nose filled with snot.

Mom’s face darkened. She took a seat beside Phoebe and placed her hand on Phoebe’s back. She didn’t want to ask, but it was her obligation to do so.

“Can you tell me about your dream?”

Between breaths, Phoebe recounted every detail with perfect precision, down to the number of bullets Hubert had fired. Her mother listened to every word. On the outside, she was a gargoyle basking in the light of dawn, but on the inside, she was a guitar string wound far too tight.

“And then the dream ended.”

Mom sat still for a long minute. Her eyes steeled, losing their sheen, and her whole body shook. It started slowly at first, then became a full-on tremor.

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“Pack your toys,” Mom said, suddenly standing. “We’re going to go visit a friend.”

“Are you okay, Mommy?”

Mom looked Phoebe in the eyes and composed herself. She softened and knelt by her daughter’s side. There, she kissed Phoebe’s forehead and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“I’m okay,” Mom said. “You’re going to be okay, too. We just need to get you looked at.”

“By a doctor?”

“By a doctor, yes. Just not like one you’ve been to before. This one will help you understand the meaning of your dream, okay? Now, pack your toys.”

Young Phoebe looked over the stuffed animals. In the black buttons of their eyes, she no longer saw Mr. Elephant, Mr. Teddy, Mrs. Snake, or Mr. Wolf. Instead, she saw stitched fabric stuffed with cotton, vulnerable at the seams.

“I don’t need one,” Phoebe said.

Her mother sighed, icy cold. She knew the truth all too well. This would be the first of a hundred night terrors. The start of a thousand sleepless nights. The beginning of a journey that ended in obsession, apathy, or death. Sometimes all three. It was too much for a six-year-old.

And yet, it was the destiny that awaited her daughter all the same.

Chapter 17

Things Change

Present Day

Phillip Wolfe

I SLAMMED THE DOOR behind me and toppled face-first onto my bed. With a pillow in my face, I screamed until my diaphragm hurt and struggled to catch my breath behind a cascade of tears. It was only once I was on the verge of passing out that I finally mellowed enough to curl into a ball and quiver.

I had so many questions. Who was Thanatos? Why did he kill my father? What was transcendence?

“Phillip?” Samson had arrived to check on me.

“Go away!” I shouted.

“Okay.”

He didn’t need to be told twice, and his heavy footsteps vanished down the hall.

Anger coursed through me. I felt like I needed to throw something. A pillow was too light—I needed something to *break*. I dug my phone from my pocket, ready to throw it against the wall when a flash appeared on screen. A text message.

‘This is Grandpa. I got a new phone. Don’t text unless it’s an emergency. Miss you.’

My thumbs pecked at the screen as I typed the words: *‘We need to talk about Dad.’*

There was a pause.

‘I know how he died,’ I added.

To this, Grandpa replied immediately. *‘What room are you staying in?’*

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What? Why did that matter?

'108'

'Crack the door and fall asleep,' he texted. 'I'll be there in an hour.'

I didn't know what he meant, but the confusion served well to replace my anger. Hoping that maybe, *just maybe*, there was a way for him to reach me, I swallowed a dose of melatonin, left the door cracked open, and closed my eyes in bed. Within twenty minutes, I relaxed. After an hour, I dozed off.



I was home. My body filled with warmth as I stood on the sidewalk and eyed the patterned brick exterior and smooth concrete driveway that were part of my most cherished memories. I'd seen these surfaces a thousand times, but somehow, this time was better than any time before.

My feet moved on their own up the sidewalk, and when I stepped up on the porch, I smiled wide. My mother's favorite wreath dangled from a hook, smelling of her fresh perfume. My father's most cherished doormat lay on the floor, a "Hi, I'm Mat" joke inscribed across it. My childhood crafting project hung above the doorbell, displaying the numbers of our home address in crudely carved wood. The house was part of a blueprint portfolio, so there were thousands just like it—but this one was *mine*. It'd been scuffed and worn through years of my youth, making it truly one-of-a-kind.

I reached for the handle and opened the door. A cheap chandelier hung in the foyer, and though it was made of tacky, fake crystals, it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. Across the way was a basic dining room, perfectly set for guests we would never entertain. To the right was the kitchen, left a wonderful mess from the family's mismatched schedules, and beyond that was

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the living room full of well-worn couches and a blackened fireplace.

Everything was exactly where I'd left it. I was home.

But wait. No. This couldn't be home. It couldn't be home because...

Because two years ago, this house was foreclosed upon. Last year, I was evicted. A month after that, it was demolished. This house was—

“Hey, Phillip.”

Grandpa's strong voice spoke behind me. I jumped in shock and faced him. I didn't know whether to be angry or relieved he was here, and when I spoke next, not even *I* knew what I was going to say.

“How are you here?”

“I'm not at Mandala if that's what you're asking,” Grandpa said. “Let's just say I learned some new tricks before falling into that coma. If you attend this year's research symposium, you'll understand.”

“Okay, but where have you been?” I stepped toward him with a bit of trepidation, as though he were a ghost. “I've missed you.”

“I've been trying to stay off the radar,” Grandpa said. “Any strange event could trigger a premonition, and if the Night Corps found me...” he smacked his lips. “Don't worry about it. All you need to worry about is how little time we have together right now. Let's make the most of it, okay?”

Grandpa extended his hand. I took it, and we did our secret handshake, finishing with a hug. I wrapped my arms around him and smiled.

“Now—” Grandpa stepped away and cupped his hand around my shoulder, “—I got your message. Is everything okay?”

I opened my mouth to tell him I was fine, but something stopped me. There was always an obligation to say one was okay, but in this moment, there was not a sliver of okayness in my bones. As such, only a stutter escaped my mouth. Grandpa nodded understandingly.

“Come,” he said. “Let's have a seat somewhere comfortable. You can find your words there.”

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He led me to the living room. As I sat on the couch, he waved his hand, and the wood logs beneath the mantel ignited. Warmth spread over me the way chocolate softens a heart. Then, he took the seat across from me on Dad's old, flattened rocker. There, before the orange glow of the fire, Grandpa waited.

I breathed deep and found it hard to make eye contact. My eyes drifted and settled on a familiar spot. Just beside the mantel, there was a pair of ruts buried into the side of a brick that, when viewed right, created a smiley face. I loved that brick. Finding it here was how I knew this was *my* home—not some cheap fabrication. Only someone who'd spent considerable time here would know to include it. And staring at it, a flood of comfort rushed through me. I was ready.

“So, at Mandala, I made a precognitor friend named Phoebe,” I started. “It turns out her first premonition was about Dad and how he died. He was murdered by a man named Thanatos.”

Grandpa remained stoic, yet the creases in his face deepened. In this moment, he didn't just look older—he looked elderly.

“Who is he?” I asked. “Thanatos?”

“Thanatos is the leader of the Night Corps,” Grandpa said, his voice wavering. “He's a mass murderer who believes he has the right—the obligation—to kill the weak.”

“Why?”

“Because he has a warped view of the world,” Grandpa said. “Why else?”

“But why did he come after Dad?”

“What can you tell me about Phoebe's premonition?” Grandpa said, straightening. “How did it happen?”

“Uhh... the file didn't say much. It just said Dad fought Thanatos while Mom ran away.”

“Did your father put up a good fight?” Grandpa asked.

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“Well, he died, so...”

“No,” Grandpa waved both his hands. “Of course he died. He was never going to be a match for Thanatos. But did he fight well enough that Cassandra escaped?”

My eyes watered, and I spoke through a tight throat.

“I don’t know,” I said, the revelation spilling over me.

“If she survived even a day longer, then he put up a hell of a fight.” Grandpa smiled to himself. “I’m proud of him.”

“Does that mean...” I looked deep into Grandpa’s eyes. “Is my Mom still—”

“I don’t know,” Grandpa admitted. “I’ve been looking, but I can’t find a trace of her. No addresses, no obituaries. With her skill, she could evade fate for as long as she wants. I hope that’s what’s happening, but I don’t know for sure. I’m sorry.”

A pensive silence filled the room, and my eyes drifted back to the fireplace. The light burned through every crevice of the stone, and the intensity of the flames waxed and waned like the lungs of a living creature. My emotions swelled and troughed alongside it.

“So, now you know the truth,” Grandpa said. “Are you okay?”

“I don’t know. I just thought Dad died peacefully in his sleep. And now... Now what do I do?”

“Come,” Grandpa said, heaving to his feet. “Let’s go for a walk.”

Reluctantly, I stood and followed Grandpa outside. A new rush of nostalgia hit me as the backyard came into view, and I found us approaching an acre of familiar land. Only a stone’s throw away was the old fishing pond, and though it was filled with muck, it was also chock full of memories. This was where Grandpa and I would fish every Sunday until I was twelve years old.

As I looked over the pond, I realized how much taller I’d gotten since the last time I was here. I could see farther out and deeper down than ever before,

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and this new perspective made the pond seem smaller. Less magical. Still, though, it was *our* pond, and I wanted to fish.

Grandpa held out his hand and a rod appeared in his grasp. He handed it to me, then made another one for himself. As he cast out, the lines in his face softened and he suddenly looked ten years younger. This was the Grandpa from my memories.

“Phoebe’s prophecy is a relic of the past,” Grandpa said, sensing my thoughts. “You’d do well to forget it.”

“How can you say that?”

“I can see what you’re thinking,” he said. “What you’re feeling. And it’s not worth it.”

“Yeah?” I gave him a stern look. “So, what am I thinking about?”

“Revenge.”

I didn’t respond.

“Long ago, I fought for revenge,” Grandpa said, angling his rod to the left. “And I got what I was after. And in turn, I made new enemies who sought their own revenge. They got what they wanted too. And now, here you are seeking revenge against them. Funny how that works.” He fidgeted with his reel a couple turns. “Tell me—what happens if you win? Does the world get better? Do you feel better? Or do you simply create a new enemy out of the blood of the old? Revenge is a cycle—we all know this. But the thing nobody wants to admit is that, if the cycle is going to end, there *must* be a loser. The hard truth is that it’s more noble to stay the loser than to become a slave to the cycle. The past is not the present nor the future. It’s best to leave it where it is.”

“But the past is important,” I countered, jerking my line a touch. “We couldn’t have a present without a past.”

“That’s not true,” Grandpa said, reeling his lure on the surface. “At some point, there must have been a beginning—a time with no past. And eventually,

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there will be an end—a time with no future. But at each and every moment, from start to finish, there is a present. And in the present, things change. Isn't it important that things change?"

"I... I don't know..."

"It is," Grandpa assured me. "And I can prove it. When you were a child, I'd place you on my shoulders and carry you around. At some point, I stopped doing that. Do you know why?"

"Because I grew too big," I said.

"That's half the story." Grandpa reeled in his bait and cast his line a second time. "When you were seven years old, you wanted to be carried everywhere, and I was happy to do it. But when you were eight, you grew too heavy for me on my bad days, so I had to let you wander sometimes. As it turns out, you liked wandering. So, if I'd have asked you at seven if you wanted to be picked up for the rest of your life, you'd have said yes. But once you were eight, if I asked if you wanted to be picked up *at all*, you'd have said no. And so you see, it wasn't until things *changed* that you learned what it was you truly wanted."

"And what if I didn't like wandering?"

"It wouldn't have mattered," Grandpa said. "By the time you were nine, I couldn't pick you up anyway, so you would've spent all your time tearing down your past instead of building up your future. There's only so much space in your heart, and considerations for the past, present, and future fill the same amount of space. Knowing this, an appreciation of the present moment will always be the key to filling you with the most joy."

A fish nibbled at my bait, and I used this as an excuse to mull over his words. But the fish didn't bite; it swam away.

"I don't think appreciation matters," I countered. "I appreciated our time together when I was living it. I *knew* we were in the golden era. That appreciation didn't do anything to stop those moments from passing."

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“Let’s zoom out,” Grandpa said. “One day, you will die. Does that mean you should not appreciate any aspect of your life?”

Before I could answer, I suddenly hooked a fish. The rush of the moment took over, and I struggled with the weight of what I’d snagged. As it got closer, I imagined the kind of fish it might be. A large bowfin? A striped bass? A grass carp? The struggle brought a smile to my face. I reeled harder and harder until...

“Lake grass,” I said, pulling the soggy weed up to the surface. “Why is it always lake grass?”

“Tell me,” Grandpa started. “While reeling, when were you happiest?”

I thought about it. “When I was expecting a big fish.”

“Like the ones you used to catch, right?”

I nodded.

“And when were you the saddest?”

“When it was a knot of grass.”

“When it was a knot of grass, *again*,” Grandpa repeated. “Like the kind you’ve caught before.”

I nodded again, starting to understand.

“Phillip, listen to me. Forget the prophecy. Forget the murder. Forget everything you cannot change. If you can stay in the present, you’ll be happy no matter what you reel in. If you can manage what I’m asking, then nothing will ever weigh you down again.”

“Okay.” I nodded. Then I added, “But I’m still going to catch a big fish today.”

Grandpa leaned his head back and chuckled, but the laugh faded as something caught his eye. I followed his gaze. Far in the distance, a black void was expanding. The end of the dream was coming.

“When will I see you again?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Grandpa said, taking a deep breath. “If Mal finds me...”

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Grandpa shook his head. “It was good to see you here and now. I’ll see you again, I’m sure.”

“Do you promise?”

“No,” Grandpa said plainly. “That’s future stuff.”

And then there was darkness.



Chapter 18

Precognition Class

AFTER SEEING GRANDPA IN last night's dream, I found my bed to be a perfect cocoon. Every part of my body was cradled by the memory foam, and I wanted to stay put forever. The lingering image of Grandpa stayed in my mind, and it was wonderful to know he was okay. I fell asleep again hoping to catch him in another dream, but he was nowhere to be found.

The next morning, I awoke to someone knocking on my door. With a groan, I rolled out of bed and hobbled across the room. The extra melatonin had kept me motionless while I slept, so my feet were numb. Despite that, I felt warm and comfortable for the first time since reporting to this place.

But that comfort faded when I found Phoebe standing in the door frame, wringing her hands.

"Hey," I said, not sure what tone to take.

"Uh, hey, Phillip," Phoebe said. "Uh, how are you?"

I nodded for a few seconds, trying to shake my exhaustion. "I'm good," I said tepidly. "Tired, but good."

"Good," Phoebe said.

Silence.

"So..."

"Right. Uh, about yesterday." Phoebe shrugged. "We should've let that file stay put, huh?"

I brushed at my face hoping I'd slept away any evidence that I'd cried last night. Amid my morning brain, it took a moment to remember how everything went down. And at the end of it all, I felt like it was better to know how Dad died. Plus, it allowed me to see Grandpa last night.

"No, I'm glad we read it."

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“So, you’re not mad at me?” Phoebe asked.

“Mad at you?” I cocked my head. “For what?”

“I don’t know. I just... it felt like maybe...”

“Of course I’m not mad at you. The dreams choose the dreamer, right? I don’t understand how it works, but I’m willing to give it a shot. I’d love to learn more about precognition now that...” I was going to say *now that I know it’s real*, but I wasn’t ready to admit that part out loud yet—even if I was starting to believe it.

“That’s actually why I’m here,” Phoebe said, finding her footing in the conversation. “The first precognitive class is starting soon. You mentioned you might want to come. Still interested?”

“Absolutely,” I said. “Just—give me a sec.”

I closed the door, brushed my teeth, and changed my clothes. Then I hurried back out to the hallway. Phoebe was sitting with her back against a wall, and she stood as I came into view. We exchanged a nod and took off together toward the classroom.

Our conversation was light along the way, and this gave me plenty of space to wonder what the class would be like. Would there be crystal balls and tarot cards? Would they sleep and dream up prophecies? Read star charts and analyze sun signs? I had no idea. Usually, that’d make me feel uncomfortable, but today, it was exciting.

We arrived to a mostly empty room and took our seats in the back while the class trickled in. Perhaps it was unfair of me to assume it, but I had expected everyone to be stereotypically hippie, with natty hair, gaudy jewelry, and lots of perfume. In reality, I found them all unremarkable. Like, *remarkably* unremarkable. I could’ve passed any of them on the street and never guessed they had a gift.

The chairs filled, and the clock struck noon. Once everyone was in attendance, a subtle tension formed. We were waiting on just one last person—

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the teacher. And soon enough, the door creaked open.

Dr. Delphi walked in. She took smooth, intentional strides to her desk, placed a small book on the tabletop, and turned toward the board. There, in perfect cursive, she wrote her name.

I stared daggers at Phoebe as she mouthed an apology.

“My name is Dr. Delphi,” she said, turning away from the board. “I will not ask for your name. You will not tell it to me.” As Dr. Delphi spoke, she made a concerted effort to look above the students and avoid eye contact. “Instead, you will be assigned a number based on your current seat, and all your future class work will be turned in under that nomenclature.”

“Ask if you can audit the class,” Phoebe whispered.

Reluctantly, I raised my hand.

“Do not worry, Number Fifteen,” Dr. Delphi said, her voice airy and mysterious. “This is the first and last precognitive class you’ll ever attend.”

My insides turned, and I blushed, not sure if that was a prophecy or a blunt way of saying ‘no’.

“So, today we will discuss the science of precognition.” Dr. Delphi stood perfectly still while lecturing. “All people can perceive three dimensions—height, width, and depth. But precognitors like you can temporarily see into the fourth dimension. The fourth dimension is time, or more specifically, the time stream. So, what is the time stream?”

A man in the front raised his hand. “It’s the forward movement of time.”

Dr. Delphi sighed. She’d clearly meant for her question to remain rhetorical. “It’s a bit more complicated than that, Number—” she counted the desks back, “—Five.”

Her detachment was so absurd that I stifled a chuckle.

“The time stream is a vibrating string—a literal time line. At the moment of the big bang, all the universe’s energy was calculated, and the imprints of the past, present, and future were strung into the cosmic microwave

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background. This string creates music-like ripples that we can hear—or see—when we sleep.”

Everyone in class was nodding, but I was absolutely lost. I felt a pull to ask a question, but I decided against it.

“So how does it work on a physical level?” This time, Dr. Delphi’s rhetorical question was met with silence. “When a coalescent sleeps, their alpha waves pulse faster. This is how they share dreams. But when a precognitor sleeps, their alpha waves pulse slower. And when they pulse slow enough, the frequency of your alpha waves might line up with the frequency of the time stream. If that happens, you see the future.”

The girl beside me raised her hand.

“Hand down, Number Seven. The reason we only see events occurring a short time into the future is that our brains are not good at maintaining the required amplitude for future-vision to occur. Seeing into the future is a lot like holding your breath underwater. The longer you do it, the more ocean you can see—but if you hold your breath too long...”

The girl lowered her hand.

“Now, before I continue, I want you all to understand something,” Dr. Delphi said, her voice icier than usual. “If there is one thing to take from this lesson, it’s this: A precognitive dream is destined to become the future. There is nothing you can do to change the outcome of a dream. Nothing.”

Phoebe’s hand shot up into the air so fast that I had to do a double take, and she spat out her question before Dr. Delphi could deny her the opportunity to speak.

“What about transcendence?” she said.

Dr. Delphi lost composure and looked directly at Phoebe. Quickly, she averted her eyes again. “Where did you hear that term?”

“It was in a dream,” Phoebe replied. “A man said it could change the future—”

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“Transcendence is not real,” Dr. Delphi said. “Forget it.”

Phoebe furrowed her brow. “But what is it? A theory? A concept?”

“It’s *nothing*.”

The class stared at Dr. Delphi, finding her tone uncharacteristically harsh. But I stared at Phoebe, unsure of what she was doing.

The teacher drew a tightly wound breath and cleared her throat. “It’s nonsense,” she said, much more level in her tone. “You’d do well to forget the idea, Number—”

“Can’t you tell me what it is I’m supposed to forget?” Phoebe pushed.

Dr. Delphi pursed her lips. After a long pause and a deep thought, she narrowed her eyes. “Class dismissed,” she said simply.

Nobody moved. I looked over at Phoebe and found my own adrenaline pumping. Part of me wanted to reach out and stop her, but I knew Phoebe would never forgive me if I stepped in. So, I sat still alongside everyone else, waiting to hear a pin drop.

“What’s transcendence?” Phoebe pressed harder.

“Class. Dismissed.”

“What’s transcendence?”

“*Class dismissed!*”

“*What’s transcendence?!*”

“It’s a fairy tale! It’s impossible! It’s a waste of time! And more importantly, *Phoebe*, it’s classified!”

The class broke into a murmur. My own eyes widened, and I stared down at my desk, regretting my decision to come. Everyone was looking at Phoebe, but I felt like they were looking at me. My gut hurt from the embarrassment; I could only imagine how Phoebe felt.

Dr. Delphi folded her hands in front of her body. “You’re dismissed, Number Fourteen. Leave.”

With a huff, Phoebe reached under her desk, gathered her things, and

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stormed out of the room. I watched her, unable to compel myself to follow. It wasn't until she was all the way gone that I worked up the nerve. Dr. Delphi refused to look at me as I muttered an apology and gave chase to Phoebe. The door closed behind me with a heavy *thud*, louder than I intended. I flinched and shrank away, now desperate to leave the class behind me.

Phoebe was waiting only a few paces away. I'd expected her to be a mess of tears, but I was wrong. She was smiling.

“Why are you happy?”

“Because Dr. Delphi said transcendence is classified,” Phoebe said.

“So?”

“So... that means it's real.”

Chapter 19

Imagination Class

DR. DELPHI WAS RIGHT. I never went back to her class. Two weeks passed, and I kept an ear open for any mention of transcendence, but the drama had died out entirely. Even Phoebe had started coming back from precognition classes with a smile.

Over the following weeks, I attended coalescence classes religiously, and while I never felt I was getting any better at lucid dreaming, I always left excited to return the next day. Despite my enthusiasm, however, I lagged behind my peers. While it would've been easy for Anberlin to give up on me, he didn't. Instead, he was constantly supportive and opted to spend extra time with me during class. Because of this, I was motivated to do something I'd never done before: try harder.

Outside of class, I spent most of my free time with Samson and Phoebe. I went to the gym with Samson, toured the outside world with Phoebe, and ate lunch nearly every day with them both. Oftentimes, I'd send one or the other a text and learn they were already spending time together, so meeting up with them was easy. Other times, they'd knock on my door to invite me along to a movie.

My apprehensions about hanging out were dwindling as I realized they weren't going to abandon me for being uncool, and soon I began to open up about all sorts of personal matters. Phoebe was exceptionally receptive to this, and I allowed myself to get closer to her than I'd gotten with anyone in a while.

The only thing I wouldn't tell her about was Aurora. I'd begun to see Aurora often, and instead of lingering in the distance as she normally would, she had started approaching me directly. We would meet at beautiful, imaginary locations in my dreams and talk about life. Knowing she wasn't a

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real person allowed me to be genuine, as I was never afraid I had anything to lose. We talked about happiness and courage. We talked about past and future. We talked about life and death, and life after death. It felt more open and honest than any other relationship in my life.

Things were going smoothly until one day I found Phoebe and Samson holding hands in the hallway before class.

“What’s this?” I asked, pointing at their interlocked fingers.

“He asked me out last night,” Phoebe said, blushing.

A part of me deflated. I didn’t realize how close they’d gotten, which made me... angry?

Why am I angry? I thought, trying to unfurl my eyebrows before they noticed. *I should be happy for them.*

“It’s nothing serious,” Samson tacked on. “We’re just dating.”

There was a tight, tense pause.

“Uh, okay,” I said. “Congratulations.”

Congratulations? Is that the right thing to say?

Samson smirked. “Thanks. Let’s get going. Class is starting in a few.”

We took off together, though I’d never felt more alone. At one point in the walk, Phoebe looked up at Samson with bright eyes, and Samson looked back with a glint of happiness. And while they were entranced, I eyed them both with secretive disgust.

Be happy for them!

As if it were that easy.

After an eternal walk, we arrived in class and took our seats. The knot of tension in my chest unwound as their hands unclasped, and I found I could breathe again.

When Anberlin arrived, he looked disheveled and sleepy, but when he spoke, it was cheery as ever.

“Good morning, everyone,” he said, hopping onto the front desk. “By

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now, you've all had a couple of weeks to familiarize yourself with lucid dreaming. I hope you've made significant progress. If not, then you'll be left behind."

I shuffled nervously.

"Today, we're going to learn your first skill. Creation."

Anberlin snapped his fingers, and a yellow tennis ball appeared in his hand like magic. He gestured around the room waiting for someone to acknowledge the sleight of hand. A boy in the front *ooed* loudly and Anberlin took a shallow bow.

"Thank you, thank you. Now, the focus of this lesson will be on imagination. Society believes imagination is a trait people inherently have, but the truth is much more nuanced. Imagination isn't a talent or gift. It's a muscle. And like all muscles, it must be pushed, strained, and abused to grow stronger."

Anberlin looked around the room, finding an ocean of empty expressions.

"I promise it's as simple as I'm making it sound. Most of you are thinking about muscles as they relate to physical abilities, and this is good. It takes muscles to throw a tennis ball, for instance."

Anberlin threw the tennis ball. It bounced off the far wall, hit the ground, and shot back into his hands.

"Wasn't that impressive?" Anberlin asked, holding his arms out for an audience. The same boy that *ooed* earlier began applauding wildly. Instinctively, Phoebe joined in. She stopped when she realized there was nothing to clap about. Her cheeks went adorably pink.

Stop looking at her.

"No, of course it wasn't impressive," Anberlin said. "But it should've been. Let me explain. Nobody is born knowing how to throw a ball. We all have to learn it as a skill. My very first throw in life was weak and uncoordinated, but this most recent toss was strong and precise. To get to that level, I had to train myself with repetition. I had to build the right muscles by

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straining them. And if I kept working hard enough, I bet I could sling this ball a hundred miles per hour. And I bet you could too.”

Some in the class believed his words. I wasn't one of them.

“This is exactly how you should think about imagination,” Anberlin continued. “The first thing you ever drew was a stick figure, but I bet you could draw something much better now, couldn't you? Imagination, like any other skill, requires practice and strain. Are we all together?”

The class nodded.

“Alright. So, today, you're going to flex your brains. I'm going to throw this tennis ball at you and give you a situation. Your task is to figure out a solution as fast as you can before throwing it back. Don't fret if you're not good at imagination—this is something we can build, develop, and train over time. Okay? Is everyone ready?”

Anberlin's eyes swept across the room as he searched for his first victim. After a brief pause, he tossed the ball to Samson who snatched it out of the air with one hand.

“Samson,” Anberlin started, “you're facing an opponent with a gun. What would you create to protect yourself?”

“A bigger gun,” Samson said. With a cocky swagger, he tossed the ball back to Anberlin.

“Sure,” Anberlin replied, a little iffy. “Is there anything you can do defensively?”

“Of course,” Samson said. “I can punch the attacker in the face.”

“Alright,” Anberlin laughed, not willing to press the matter. “Body armor is what I would make. Or a shield. Or a wall. Not everything's a nail, and you can be much more than a hammer. Moving on.”

Samson gave Phoebe a smug look, and she flashed him a brilliant smile. I looked away from them both.

Anberlin searched for the next student to call upon.

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“Ethan.” Anberlin tossed the ball to the boy up front who’d been cheering. “Ethan, you’re collecting intel. A group of guys, potentially dangerous, are running a meeting inside a dream. You need to be in that meeting, but you can’t be seen under any circumstances. How do you get in?”

Ethan hesitated.

“They’re coming your way,” Anberlin said, putting on the pressure.

“I would...” Ethan paused. “I would transform into a bug. That way, I’d be small enough to hide.”

“Transfiguration?” Anberlin mused. “To transform into a being that small is nearly impossible—but if this is a route that interests you, I’ll start looking for an appropriate mentor. They’re exceptionally rare, so I might have to get you a digital one, but please, let me know.”

Ethan nodded and threw the ball back at Anberlin.

“Alright, who’s next?” Anberlin asked, looking around the room. “How about... Phoebe?”

Phoebe caught the ball with one hand, moving with a surprising amount of dexterity. She flashed a wink at Samson, who eyed her competitively. The uncomfortable flurry in my stomach came churning back.

“The enemy has a gun pointed at your partner’s head. How do you save their life?”

“I’d jump in front of the bullet,” Phoebe answered. With confidence, she threw the tennis ball back at Anberlin. Anberlin caught the ball and eyed her carefully. After a moment of pause, he shook his head and tossed the ball back.

“No. Think of something to save both your lives.”

This time, as the ball came back, Phoebe fumbled, and it rolled off her desk. Nervously, she scrambled to pick it up. “Uh...”

“The enemy is reaching for the trigger,” Anberlin pressed. “Think of something.”

“I would... uh...”

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“Come on, Phoebe. Clock’s ticking.”

“I’m sorry.” Phoebe let out a sharp, defeated breath. “I can’t think of anything else.”

Anberlin gave a gentle nod and soft smile to melt the tension. “That’s fine. We’re just doing an exercise. Just because you don’t want to hurt anyone doesn’t mean you have to sacrifice yourself, Phoebe. There are an infinite number of solutions out in the world; I’m sure you’ll learn how to find the best one.”

Phoebe bit her lip, and a tightness formed around her jaw. She forced herself to nod, getting her fingers around the ball and tossing it back to Anberlin.

Like it were a hot potato, Anberlin batted the ball out of the air and swatted it toward me. Its redirection hit me square in the chest before dropping onto my desk and dribbling away. I panicked and slammed my hands atop it, pinning it against the surface before it could fall to the ground.

“Phillip, you’re on top of a hill and, so far, you’ve gone unnoticed. Your partner is on the ground and out of bullets. He’s trying to make more, but he doesn’t have enough time. You have five seconds to save his life. What do you do?” Anberlin started a countdown. “Five.”

I wasted a second going over the question in my head.

“Four.”

I wasted a second being flustered by the time pressure.

“Three.”

I should supply my partner with more bullets from my imagination. That seemed to be the obvious answer.

“Two.”

But if my partner couldn’t make bullets in time, why would *I* be able to?

“One...”

“I would run down the hill and cause as much commotion as possible,” I

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blurted. “This would distract the enemy and give my partner enough time to resupply himself.”

I was confident in the answer until I realized the solution was wrong. I never created anything. My mouth opened, but it was too late to change my answer. I frowned, knowing I’d missed the point. I was a failure. As usual.

“You know what I like about that answer?” Anberlin started. “It’s that you didn’t create anything.”

My face scrunched, and I stared at Anberlin like *he* was stupid.

“Sometimes,” he continued, “people get so caught up in their new abilities that they forget about the human element. They forget about the strategy. In this situation, you’re using the entire battlefield to accomplish your mission. That makes it a perfect answer. This is what imagination is all about, class—recognizing that there’s an unlimited number of options and that you’re free to choose any of them. I’ll remember this answer, and you’ll receive credit for it on your specialty placement exam. Remember, everyone, there’s a test at the end of this class that determines your future, so please keep taking this class seriously. And thank you, Phillip.”

I tossed the ball to Anberlin, who whisked it out of the air and stashed it back in his desk. Samson gave me an approving nod. I grinned and shied away, still not used to praise.

“Now that you all understand the point, why don’t we get some hands-on practice?” Anberlin moved to the thermostat and turned on the mela gas. “We’re going to dream a lot today, and it’s going to be a lot harder to stay lucid the longer this goes on. Try to keep track of whether you’re awake or asleep. Ready? Let’s begin.”



Chapter 20

Lucid Confusion

THE CLASS COLLECTED IN the middle of an empty field. I was proud of myself for being lucid right away and decided to keep a tally of how many times I could be lucid in a row. So far, one.

Anberlin stood in front of the class and counted heads. After making sure we were all present, he began the second part of his lecture.

“Imagination is the mind’s ability to take nothing and make it into something. It’s the catalyst that fuels innovation and revolution. It’s the beginning of everything.”

Anberlin approached Phoebe.

“Phoebe, I want you to think of something small and simple. Something you know very well.”

Phoebe thought a moment. “Okay.”

“What is it?”

“Well, I used to have a small garden back at home. My sisters and I loved the hibiscus flowers. We would pick them and wear them on our ears.”

“Alright,” Anberlin said. “I want you to close your eyes and imagine the flower in your mind’s eye. Think of as many details as possible.”

Phoebe nodded and followed his directions.

“Take a deep breath. Imagine the velvety texture, the rosy color, the thick stem, and the yellow pollen buds. Remember what it was like to smell them and hold them.”

Something sparked near the ground. It started as a dull, dim, translucent mass, and it slowly morphed into something of substance. Large petals sprouted, and the outlined figure of a hibiscus formed. There was something

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unsettling about the flower, though. It was *almost* complete, but it couldn't shed its final layer of translucent gloss.

Anberlin knelt to pluck the hibiscus from the ground, but his fingers passed through the stem. He did it once more to make sure the entire class saw that the flower was incomplete, and then he instructed Phoebe to open her eyes. When Phoebe obeyed, the bright colors dimmed, and the flower lost its structure.

"There is an important caveat to imagination," Anberlin said gravely. "When all is said and done, imagination is nothing. It doesn't matter if you've conceived the perfect book or imagined the most beautiful flower; if it's not paired with hard work and dedication, it will never truly exist. All things consume energy—creation is no different."

"So, how could I make the flower real?" Phoebe asked.

"You'll need to use willpower, which is a step we're not ready to discuss yet." Anberlin gave an accentuated nod to Phoebe. "Now, that was a wonderful flower. Your mind is a very vivid place."

"Thank you," Phoebe said, beaming from the compliment.

Anberlin turned toward the rest of the class. "So, that's how it's done. Break off into groups of three and practice. All you have to do is think of something you're familiar with and imagine everything about it. For now, it's easiest if you close your eyes and have a friend tell you when you've succeeded."

Phoebe and Samson immediately branched off from the class, but I stayed put. Insecurity washed over me, and I worried about being a third wheel in their budding romance. But after a few seconds, Phoebe waved me over, and I felt better.

"This stuff's so easy," Samson said, closing his eyes. A translucent stick appeared in the air before him, and then a moment later, it became solid. He snatched it out of the air and held it proudly before him.

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“So, you can make a stick,” Anberlin said, approaching our group, “but can you imagine something more complex? Something like a chair?”

“Uh, sure,” Samson mumbled. He closed his eyes and, seconds later, a partially formed chair popped into existence. It teeter-tottered on two legs before splintering apart. Samson opened his arms in a *ta-da* sort of gesture.

“Keep working at it,” Anberlin said playfully. “Challenge yourself. It’s only that moment when you feel out of your depth that you’re growing. Remember that.”

Samson nodded and closed his eyes.

“What about you, Phillip?” Anberlin asked. “What can you imagine?”

“I, uh... I don’t know.”

“Try something.”

I tried to picture anything I could, but my mind was empty. What did I know inside and out? What was so familiar to me that I could create it from memory?

My house.

I’d seen it just two nights ago with Grandpa, and that vision had refreshed every detail. I closed my eyes and imagined my old house. I imagined the walls, the driveway, the mailbox, the lawn, and... it quickly became too much for me to hold in my head. I opened my eyes, and a flicker of light faded away in my peripherals. I glanced at Anberlin and then at the ground, ashamed.

“Phillip.”

I looked up and found Anberlin tossing me something heavy. It was a brick.

“Learn how to create a brick,” he said, “and you can build any house you want. I know it seems small, but all great things start that way. Every novel starts with a single word, every painting with a single stroke, and every mansion with a single brick. Don’t be afraid to start small, or you’ll never start at all.”

I nodded and rubbing my fingers along the surface of the brick. A part of

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me knew he was right, and another part of me refused to believe it. It was just a brick—it could never be a house. Right?



I woke up in the classroom. The entire class let out a collective groan, and we stretched in unison. I looked over at Phoebe and laughed at the red marks on her face. She smiled back at me, wide and pure. Then she looked over at Samson, and I woke up a little.

“Let’s try again,” Anberlin said, returning to the thermostat. “Have a plan. Know what you’re going to create and be ready to do it.”



We fell asleep again, this time dreaming in an empty warehouse. I wandered around until I saw Samson. What was he doing here?

“You ready, Phil?”

“For what?”

“To make a brick.”

Oh, right. I’m dreaming, I realized. My lucidity streak had started and ended at one. “Sorry. I’m ready.”

“You’ll get the hang of it.”

For the next half hour, I studied the composition of a brick with unbreakable focus. I was determined to picture it in my mind, but I was constantly distracted. Samson stayed nearby, closing in on the creation of a stool while Phoebe took to imagination with ease, creating the image of an

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entire garden, complete with trees, shrubs, and other bushes. Anberlin praised her feverishly, letting her know he was a fan of all kinds of flora. He encouraged her to try making any of them tangible, but this was a step beyond Phoebe's capabilities.

I frowned. I wanted to be good at something for once. My efforts doubled, and by the end of the dream, I was able to make a dark rectangle float at eye level. But it wasn't enough. I don't know if it would ever be enough.



I sat up at my desk. My eyes darted side to side, and my bearings were hard to come by. I questioned whether I was awake or asleep.

"That was a short dream, I know," Anberlin said. "They'll get shorter as we dream more. Let's try again." Anberlin turned the mela gas higher, and the ventilation hummed.

My mind was hazy, and I couldn't think right. Half the heads in the class were on the table, and the other half were upright and drowsy. Everything was covered in a thin, grey mist.

As I lost the battle for lucidity, the world started spinning.



I was walking around Mandala. It was oddly empty, except for a few other classmates, and I moved automatically through the halls. The thoughts in my brain seemed to trudge to the forefront of my mind with sloth-like speed.

Bricks, I thought. *Bricks*.

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I stepped past a person I didn't recognize.

What a funny word. Why am I thinking about bricks?

Darkness.



I was back in front of my desk. My eyes felt heavy, the world masked in a haze.

What was I even thinking anymore?

“It seems our dreams are becoming more localized,” Anberlin said. “We don't have many more dreams left in us.”

I blinked.



Was I awake? Was I asleep? I had no idea. I wiped the drool from my bottom lip and looked around with a lazy gaze. *Where am I?*

Anberlin rushed around the room. I didn't pay attention to him, though. Instead, I looked at Phoebe. She smiled, and I felt a pang of weakness in my stomach. Her brown eyes glimmered. Her rosy cheeks flushed. I was drawn to her.

But I couldn't focus.

Anberlin said something at the front of the room. Class was dismissed, maybe. I didn't know. Either way, I stood and left. Someone called out my name, but I ignored them. All this interrupted sleep had made me exhausted, and I stumbled down to my room, using walls to support my body weight. Everything was both familiar and odd at the same time.

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What was my lucid streak? Two? Three? I didn't know—I just needed sustained sleep now that I was awake.

When I arrived at my room, I found the door unlocked.

The doors locked automatically, didn't they?

Whatever. I dismissed the glitch before collapsing into bed. There, I lay on my stomach and buried my face in the pillows. It was such an inviting surface, and I'd never been more ready to take a nap.



Anberlin was standing in front of the classroom again. I tried to remember the last place I'd been, catching trace images of myself walking downstairs, entering my room, and lying in bed. I smiled, happy to know I was alone in my own dream. For the first time all day, I could lower my guard and enjoy myself.

Anberlin said something and everyone stood. I followed suit, leaving my belongings behind.

“Hey, wait up,” Phoebe called out.

I looked at her. She was saying something and holding my binder, but I wasn't paying attention. In my haze, I was staring at her lips. She tucked away a strand of perfect, wavy hair and smiled. Then she stared at me, waiting for a response.

I kissed her.

I didn't think about it. I didn't question it. I was safe in my dream, away from reality, so I did it. It was surreal at first, and then it was strange. She wasn't kissing me back. Why wasn't she kissing me back?

Oh, no.

“What the hell are you doing?”

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It was Samson standing in the doorway, watching me.
The reality of the situation slammed against me like a freight train.
I wasn't lucid. I wasn't dreaming. This was real life.
And I'd just kissed Phoebe in front of Samson.

Chapter 21

Nice Guys

MY HEAD WAS LIGHT, and my heart was pounding. I struggled to swallow, but that turned into a struggle to breathe.

What have I done?

Everyone was watching. I tried to speak, but my voice was soft.

“I-I’m not d-dreaming, am I?”

Phoebe said nothing. Her rosy cheeks and defensive stance confirmed what I already knew. Samson, however, pressed forward. Phoebe made a move to stop him, but Samson pushed past her and lifted his fist in the air.

I didn’t move—not because I was frozen in fear, but because I deserved this. I deserved to be hit. I *wanted* to be hit. And Samson didn’t disappoint.

All at once, I felt a sharp burn in my cheek. My legs gave way, and I collapsed, smashing my head against concrete. I lay still for several seconds as Samson stood over me. There, two blurry versions of him debated whether to hit me again.

“Samson, my office, now!” Anberlin snapped.

Samson didn’t move. His eyes burned as a barely controlled fire that was about to catch a drape and set the whole house ablaze.

Anberlin rushed forward to stand between us. He placed one hand on Samson’s chest and stared bullets at him. Samson glared back, unclenched his fist, and stormed away. Anberlin took a look at me, gave no expression, and followed Samson back to the classroom.

The world was blurry as I stood. Without scoping for the extent of the fallout, I ran, fighting the way my legs buckled under the weight of each step. I passed a half-dozen people on my way back to my room, and they all stared

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at me like they knew what I'd done.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

By the time I reached my room, my hands were shaking so much it took a full minute to slide my key card through the lock, and once inside, I hid beneath my bedsheets and sobbed.

I shouldn't have kissed her.

I rubbed the bruise on my cheek, trying to massage the swelling.

I shouldn't have kissed her.

This thought hung in my head for far too long. It overpowered my mind, and I couldn't think of any other regret but that one. An hour passed, then another.

I shouldn't have kissed her.

Hours of crying sapped energy away from me. Maybe it was exhaustion, or maybe it was the mela still in my system, but somehow, my breathing evened out, and I fell asleep.



I was in the middle of a prairie with grass up to my calves. The wind was blowing, and petals of dandelions were caught in the whirl. They fluttered past, and it should've been dazzling the way they flickered and flipped, but I couldn't appreciate it. Despite being in a dream, I remembered everything. I remembered Phoebe. I remembered Samson. I remembered running. I was fully lucid the one time I wished I could forget everything.

Why did I kiss her?

I was on the verge of crying again, but before the first teardrop could drip down my face, a familiar voice called out to me.

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“Phillip!”

Aurora was walking toward me from the other side of the prairie wearing a wide smile. Her timing sucked. Didn't she know I needed space?

“Hey,” I said, faking enthusiasm.

She saw through it right away. “What's wrong?”

I paused, wanting desperately to lie, but I couldn't. Instead, I remained quiet.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

I tried to tell her I was, but when I opened my mouth, my throat closed up. I wasn't okay; I didn't know if I ever would be again.

“Hey, hey,” she said soothingly. “Let's go somewhere where you can collect your thoughts.”

Aurora snapped her fingers, and a hot-air balloon appeared behind her. Rainbow-colored stripes swept down the sides and a thatch basket hung underneath. In the center, a flamethrower released gas into an inflated tarp.

“Come on,” Aurora beckoned softly, stepping on board and holding out her hand. “I promise it's easier to think up there.”

But I didn't move. My mind was already in a negative place, and as I anticipated floating high in the sky, my brain flickered through a dozen scenarios that all ended with my death. Maybe the balloon would pop. Maybe the basket would detach. Maybe I'd topple over the edge of the railing. Hell, at this point, maybe I'd throw myself off.

But Aurora invited me again, re-gesturing her outstretched hand. There were a lot of reasons to stay on solid ground, but as I looked at Aurora, I forced myself into the basket. She closed the gate behind me, and we began to rise. My knuckles tightened on the handrails, and the color in my face drained with every small wobble.

“So, what's wrong?”

Somehow, Aurora was right. With my mind distracted by my fear of

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heights, it was easier to open up. It was as though facing down death minimized my problems elsewhere. Still, the words were stuck in the back of my throat, and it was only with tremendous amounts of effort that I dislodged them.

“If I tell you what’s wrong,” I started, “will you promise not to think less of me?”

“No,” she said right away. “But it’s understandable if you made a simple mistake.”

A mistake. Of course. This was just a mistake. I didn’t mean to kiss Phoebe. It just happened. But would Aurora understand it that way?

“I—I kissed my friend,” I admitted.

“Oh?”

“...in front of her boyfriend.” I sighed. “Who is also my friend.”

“Oh...” Aurora thought for a moment. “Well, do you like her? The girl you kissed?”

“I mean... Maybe? Yes? I think so...”

“And have you told this girl how you feel?”

“No,” I answered, horrified by the thought. “Definitely not.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to.”

“And why wouldn’t you want to?” Aurora asked.

I sighed and retreated. I didn’t know. As we rose above the treetops and drifted over a prairie, I tried to find an answer, but all I could think about was fear. Was that my answer? Or were the heights just getting to me?

“The thought of admitting you like someone,” Aurora said, “how does it make you feel?”

“Nervous.”

“Why?”

I considered it and shook my head. “I just don’t want to speak too soon,

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you know?”

Aurora turned up her nose, which compelled me to continue.

“No, I mean... I want to be good friends with her before I admit my feelings. Like, if do enough things for her, she’ll realize I’m a good guy, you know? And then maybe she’ll like me.”

“So, you want to be a nice guy,” Aurora said, a tilt of disgust in her voice. Her tone shocked me.

“What’s wrong with being a nice guy?”

“Do you know why ‘nice’ guys finish last?” Her voice held a line of anger. “It’s because they’re cruel. Nice guys aren’t nice because they’re good people; they’re nice because they think it’ll lead to something. If you’re only nice because you think you have something to gain, then you’re not nice.”

I stared straight down to the ground a thousand feet away. Somehow, it was easier to look there than at Aurora.

“That doesn’t make any sense. They’re *nice* guys. Are you saying I should be mean?”

“No. You need to be *kind*.”

“Kind?” I raised my arms halfway, baffled. “What’s the difference between nice and kind?”

“What do you think?”

I looked up at the colorful tarp and tried to discern an answer. Surely, there was a difference between nice and kind—otherwise, why would we need separate words for the concepts? But I’d never thought about the discernment before.

“Let me give you a hint,” Aurora said. “I’m not being nice right now, am I? I’m being kind. I’m telling you something you don’t want to hear, and I’m doing it because I care enough to tell you how it is. So, what’s the difference?”

“I guess...” I drew a deep breath. “Is niceness about myself, and kindness about others?”

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Aurora nodded. “Keep going.”

“Like, maybe I’m nice because it makes *me* feel good. I don’t want to think of myself as being mean, so I avoid confrontations to serve that feeling. But kindness would be about seeing through discomfort because it’s better for other people, right? Maybe...” I thought about how to simplify it. “People are nice so they can feel good about themselves; people are kind because they care about others.”

“Right,” Aurora said. “So, tell me—all this wallowing, is it because you can no longer feel good about yourself? You did what you wanted to do from the beginning, and now you lost your niceness. It sucks, doesn’t it.”

I glared at her, but she was right. After a few seconds, my expression softened and I drew a breath. The air was getting thin and it didn’t fill me as much as I’d hoped.

“Look,” Aurora said. “It’s time to stop being nice. Be direct and tell your friend you want a relationship.”

“I just—” I sighed. “It’s not that easy.”

“It is. You just proved it. Even though you did the wrong thing—and you *did* do the wrong thing—telling the truth has always been as easy as walking up and making a clear gesture. Next time, though, stick with words.”

“Look, I wouldn’t have kissed her if I thought I was awake.”

“And don’t you see that that’s the problem?” Aurora looked back at the flamethrower and leaned fearlessly against the side of the basket. “Why do you change when nobody’s looking? Why do you act differently when you think you’re dreaming alone? Being true to yourself shouldn’t be a burden. If it is, what does that mean for you?”

“It means I’m doing something wrong,” I admitted.

“You got it.”

“Alright, well, I kissed her, and she doesn’t like me back.” I shrugged. “What good is it now?”

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“Now you know what’s real, and you can change because of it,” Aurora said. “You need to figure out who you are and what you want out of life. The idea of love is to *share* it with someone. It doesn’t have to be her. So, she doesn’t like you, no big deal. In fact, it’s great because you no longer have to be a victim of hope. You’ll either have to stop liking her or stop being her friend—there’s nothing in between.”

“Well, I don’t want to lose her as a friend.”

“Then you can’t keep wanting to kiss her,” Aurora said.

I huffed and scrunched my lips. My arms were crossed, though I didn’t remember doing that. My body moved a little closer to the edge of the basket, and I hoped adrenaline would replace my frustration. This time, it didn’t.

“Phillip, what’s your worst quality?”

A stiff wind blew through the balloon. I didn’t have words. I didn’t know. I looked away. My eyes met with the horizon, and I realized how far we’d come. My body tightened again, and fear coursed through me.

“I’m a coward,” I said. It was hard to say aloud.

“And what do you want to be?”

I stared at her and dug my tongue into my cheek. “I want to be fearless.”

“Let’s give you a chance to face your fear.” Aurora took a light jump and hoisted herself up onto the corner of the thatch basket. Her toes hung off the lip, and she held out her hand. “Come. Take a leap. I’ll catch you and we’ll fly off together. I promise.”

Cautiously, I stepped forward to the edge of the basket and peered over the edge. From the forests, to the mountains, to the rivers, it was all beautiful. I wanted to see it up close, to fly overhead, but what if I couldn’t be caught? What if Aurora couldn’t save me? No. It was too risky. I backed away from the barrier, leaving her hand empty.

“I’m not ready,” I said.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

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I nodded.

Aurora frowned, disappointed. “When will you be ready, then? How will you know when it’s time?”

“I don’t know,” I said, “but it’s not today.”

“The truth,” she said, teetering backward over the edge, “is that you’ll never be ready. At some point, you’ll have to jump anyway—or you’ll never do it at all.”

With a bend, she fell over the side of the balloon. The insides of my stomach turned over as I watched her fall into a thousand feet of air. Halfway to the ground, she caught herself and soared away. And as I watched her glide into the sunset, I wished I’d jumped.

Chapter 22

The Meditator

MY EYES OPENED TO a soft knock on my door. I shuddered and lay still, convinced Samson was here to beat me up for good. After another knock, however, I knew it was time to face fate. I rolled out of bed and answered the door, resigning myself to a beating I knew I deserved. But it wasn't Samson in the doorway—it was Phoebe.

My heart lurched. More than ever, I considered closing the door and ignoring my problems, but the words of Aurora burned through my mind. If I wanted to be her friend, I needed to confront this. Now.

“Hey,” Phoebe said softly. “Can I come in?”

“Yeah,” I said, shuffling sideways. There was an awkward moment as she moved past me, and I felt like I couldn't look at anything but the floor. Once the door was closed, I knew I needed to speak first. “Listen, I'm, uh, *really* sorry about what I did.”

“It's okay,” she said. “You thought you were dreaming. Sometimes, I get confused too.”

I nodded and smiled ruefully.

“But you should know...” Phoebe made explicit eye contact.

Something inflated in my body. *You should know that I've always liked you*, I imagined her saying. *That we should be together.*

“You should know I'm not looking for something romantic... with you...” Phoebe said. “I'm with Samson now, and I don't want to mess that up.”

My heart deflated. Embarrassment, rejection, depression, and anger coursed through me. I felt lost. I felt ashamed. I felt...

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Good? Relieved? I felt some strange, idiotic form of victory. At least now I knew where we stood, and that meant I could focus on what mattered: friendship, nothing more. In some strange way, this was the best thing that could've happened.

“Phillip? You alright? Say something.”

“I’m okay,” I said honestly. “Listen, I understand if you don’t want to, but can we still be friends?”

“Of course,” Phoebe said, almost offended. “Of course we’re still friends.”

“Thanks,” I said, breathing a sigh of relief. “I wasn’t myself earlier. I’m sorry.”

The conversation tapered away, and for a few moments, we both stood awkwardly.

“Well, I’m going to go,” Phoebe finally said. “I still need to calm Samson down. He might not be so...”

“Forgiving?”

Phoebe shrugged. “I’ll see you at class... friend.”

“Right. See you at class... friend,” I said back, choking up in awkward, forced acceptance.

Phoebe left, and I returned to bed. The ceiling caught my attention, and as I stared at the white paint, my mind combed through thoughts, breaking up the tension and flushing it away. The cloud over my head dissipated. The worst of it was over.

Knock, knock.

Or maybe the worst of it has just arrived.

I cursed, expecting Samson at the door again. With the same trepidation as before, I dug courage from the pit of my soul and answered the door. But again, it wasn’t Samson. This time, Anberlin was standing outside my room.

“Uh, hello?”

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“Hey, Phillip. Do you mind if I come in?”

I said nothing but moved aside to clear a path.

“Thanks,” Anberlin said, shuffling inside. “You left your notebook in the classroom.” He held up my binder and placed it on my desk.

“Uh, thanks,” I said. “Is that all?”

“Actually, no,” Anberlin said, adjusting my desk chair and taking a seat. “Listen, Phillip, I think you have lucid confusion.” He paused to let my diagnosis sink in, but this wasn’t exactly cancer. “It was going to happen to someone sooner or later, and I’m sorry it happened to you. You’ll see it again from someone else this semester, I promise.”

“Whatever,” I said, sitting on my bed. “It happened to me first.”

“Which is great,” Anberlin said, his voice bright. After I shot him a disgusted look, he dialed it back. “I mean, it sucks, sure, but being first means you’ll get to tackle it first.”

“Is that the best bright side you can come up with?”

Anberlin kept his smile. “Do you want some advice on how to deal with it? The confusion?”

“Sure,” I said, my voice flat and biting.

“Always be the best version of yourself. Do that, and you’ll be one step closer to making that version a reality.”

I rolled my eyes. He might as well have told me that winning the lottery was the best way to become rich.

“I don’t know what it means to be myself,” I said. “I don’t know who I am, or who I want to be.”

“Really?”

“Really. I skate through life every day, making it up as I go. I don’t have a plan or a goal, and I wouldn’t know where to start if I wanted one. So, I’m not sure your advice will help me, because I don’t want to *be* anyone.”

Anberlin paused as though I’d said something monumental. “Phillip, I’m

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going to ask you an important question.” He leaned forward and softened his voice. “Do you *want* to change?”

The air grew dense, and I sensed that there was a lot riding on my answer. I thought a moment and stalled another. Then, I made up my mind.

“No,” I said. “I don’t think I do.”

“I didn’t think so,” Anberlin said, his voice smooth and soothing. “But do you *want to* want to change?”

I rolled his question through my head. I didn’t want to change—that was true. But did I *wish* I *wanted* to change? To be a different person? To evolve?

I’d never wanted anything more.

“Yes,” I said. “When I look around and see people doing amazing things, I want that to be me. But my life is comfortable, and it feels like too much work to change. If I could wake up a different person, though, I would.”

“Great,” Anberlin said, climbing to his feet. “I can help you get started. Come with me.”

Anberlin moved to the door, and suddenly, this was moving too fast.

“Where are we going?” I asked, clambering to my feet.

“We are going to meditate.”

Chapter 23

Inside the Mind

I WAS READY TO protest, but Anberlin escaped my room before I could speak. And so, I trailed after him, keeping my head low as we passed through Mandala. We went up the stairs, around the corner, and arrived at his room. With a swipe of his card, we were inside.

The studio he lived in was simple. A kitchen sat against one wall, a few cots stood in the corner, and a desk was against the wall bearing only a single notebook and a pencil. The space was decorated with a handful of potted plants and—that was it. Aside from a few ferns, there was nothing. No pictures, no art, no decor. It was more interesting to describe his place by the things it lacked than what it had.

“Take a seat,” Anberlin said, gesturing toward a couple of mats in the center of his room before moving to the sink to fill a kettle with water. “Would you like some tea?”

I sat down and crossed my legs. “No thanks.”

“Are you sure? It’s chamomile.”

“I’m alright,” I said, eyeing the nearly empty room. “So, is this where you live?”

“This is it,” Anberlin said, placing the kettle on the stove. “I was living off campus with my wife, but when she died, I sold everything. Well, everything except the plants she cared for. Then, I moved back into the barracks. I always meant to get more things, but I never found anything worth owning.”

I looked down at his hand and noticed he wasn’t wearing a ring.

“I’m sorry to hear about your wife.”

“It’s okay. You know, it was her death that drove me to meditation, and

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meditation has done amazing things for me. So, while it's been terrible and heartbreaking to lose someone I love, it's also driven me to become a greater person. A better teacher."

I paused and stewed in the silence, then cracked an incredulous smile. "Do you always have a bright side?"

Anberlin matched my expression, recognizing what I saw in him. "Oh, no. I'd give everything to have her back. But still, you can always make the best of a bad situation if you choose to."

The kettle whistled, and Anberlin moved to get the pot off the stove. Then he poured steaming water into a cup and dropped a tea bag in.

"What was her name?"

"Audrey," he replied. "She was lovely, but I don't want to talk about her right now."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay." Anberlin stirred the brew as he walked back to the pads.

"So, what are we doing here, exactly?"

"We're here to meditate."

"And what am I supposed to do to meditate?"

"Nothing at first." Anberlin was careful as he lowered himself to the ground and placed the mug between us. Steam wafted off the surface, and Anberlin gazed at it as though he was lost in a memory. He smiled softly, and I imagined him sitting in a café, waiting for his wife. "Just close your eyes and listen to your mind."

I followed his instructions. Right away, my thoughts ran away from me. *I should've stayed in my room. I should've rejected Anberlin. I should've...*

"Now, Phillip," Anberlin started softly, "meditation is a special activity. You can train a monkey to play with a phone or teach a parrot to mimic conversation, but you will *never* get an animal to meditate. Meditation is exclusive to people, which means enlightenment is only for humans. Do you

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remember the other day when I discussed the conflicts that occur between different sections of the brain? The id, ego, and superego?”

“Yes.”

“Well, meditation can sort through these conflicts. It’s how we get rid of our distracting thoughts. And once we’re free of those thoughts—our fears—we find out who we are.”

“What about the people who don’t meditate?” I asked, struggling to keep my eyes closed. “Most people don’t meditate, but they seem to know who they are.”

“Most people *do* meditate, they just don’t do it well,” Anberlin countered. “Sometimes meditation is passive, like playing on your phone. Sometimes it’s active, like praying. Every method works to distract your mind so you can sort through your feelings.”

“So, are we going to play on our phones?” I asked, full of hope.

“No.” Anberlin smiled. “Those who find their true selves that way understand nothing about themselves; they simply find their baseline. But when one takes an active part in meditation, they build their self up from the ground level. It’s the difference between finding a cave to call home and understanding that the whole world has always been home. Do you feel me?”

I nodded, but I wasn’t sure I meant it.

“Good. Now, take a deep breath.”

I breathed in deeply.

“And exhale.”

I breathed out.

“So, what’s cool about being a coalescent,” Anberlin continued, “is that our brains work in a very archaic kind of way. We’re slightly more in tune with the wavelengths our brain produces. This has an interesting effect as we meditate.”

I focused on his words.

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“Don’t forget to breathe,” Anberlin reminded me.

My focus turned back toward myself. *Breathe in... Breathe out...*

“Most dreamers don’t know it, but there are two times your brain will produce alpha waves. The first, as you already know, is when you’re dreaming. The second way is when you meditate. When you meditate, you produce a very similar, slightly different version of an alpha wave.”

Breathe in... Breathe out...

“If you remember from class, alpha waves are produced in your brain. These waves mark a halfway point between consciousness and unconsciousness. They’re a bridge, and their presence allows you to gain lucidity—or become conscious amid unconsciousness. But there are two ways to cross a bridge, and you will see different things depending on which way you travel. What we’re going to do today is try to find *unconsciousness* while *conscious*. When you dream, alpha waves manifest *away* from your body. When you meditate, they manifest *inward*—toward your mind. And it’s there where you can explore them.”

Breathe in... Breathe out...

“Now, we’re about to sit in silence, and your mind is going to resist. It desperately wants stimulation. It’ll kick, scream, and throw thoughts at random. Fight through it. Draw your mind back to center and teach yourself to embrace the silence.”

I focused my mind on my breathing. For several seconds, I was empty. It was profoundly calming. But then my mind sprang alive with worry and doubt.

I wonder if Phoebe can really be my friend after this.

How can I make this up to Samson?

What if I’m going to be alone forever?

Sadness washed over me. I must have displayed it on my face, because Anberlin felt the need to speak. “Draw your mind back to center...”

I licked my lips and cut through my thoughts. The nothingness returned,

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and all I could think about was the air I was breathing. I could feel it rush into my nose, race down my windpipe, and push through my lungs. My stomach expanded, and then contracted, pushing the air back out.

I wish I could see Aurora more often, I thought. An image of her flashed through my mind's eye, and I smiled.

“Back to center, Phillip.”

I breathed in... and out...

It's kind of embarrassing that I can't do this for more than ten seconds. I'm so lame— I caught myself this time.

Breathe in... Breathe out...

Ten minutes passed, and I struggled to maintain any sense of dissociation. I thought of the things that made me happy and the things that made me sad. I thought of my future and my past. My mind raced through hundreds and thousands of thoughts—all without my permission—and seemed capable of creating anything *but* silence.

Then, all at once, my emotions compounded into a mass of ever-consuming, mind-numbing, stress-inducing, fist-clenching, chest-tightening, asphyxiating sense of distress. I wanted to scream, shout, cry, fight, run, and—

“I'll have the tea,” I spouted, the words leaving my mouth unexpectedly. I paused, horrified, then chuckled. Anberlin chuckled too.

“Sorry.”

“No, no,” Anberlin said, sliding the mug in my direction. “I knew you wanted it; I made it for you. I know how this goes the first time.”

I took the mug and drew a deep breath through my nose. The tea smelled wonderful, and when I sipped it, it tasted even better. The liquid was smooth and warmed my insides. My heart rate slowed, my mind mellowed, and a sense of serenity washed over me. Renewed, I closed my eyes again.

For several minutes, my mind remained blank, and I placed my focus solely upon my breath. Then, with my mind clear, I began to feel the world

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around me. I was aware of the humidity in the air. I was aware of the noises coming from the vent. I was even aware of gravity as it pressed down on my shoulders.

The minutes ticked by. A rush of emptiness fell over me. I felt small. I felt insignificant. I felt my place in the universe and realized I was *nothing* compared to its vastness. Nothing.

That was depressing, wasn't it? Or was it? What if... what if being nothing was a good thing?

Suddenly, I felt freedom in my insignificance. Being nothing meant my mistakes were nothing. My accomplishments were nothing. *Everything* was *nothing*. I was free. Free from expectations. Free from society. Free from the enslavement of my desires. For a moment, I was a meaningless speck of dust floating in a void—and I was free from it all.

But that moment passed, and my emotions rushed back. I hadn't noticed it before, but the faucet was leaking, and the noise pulled my attention away. I was a failure. An embarrassment. A burden.

Anberlin peeked at me behind one open eye. "Problems?"

I hunched over and breathed sharply. "I got distracted, that's all."

"I understand. Nobody gains enlightenment on their first day. Here—" Anberlin stood and pulled a cot away from the wall, "—fall asleep and I'll show you what happens when you're successful in meditation."

"What do you mean?"

"Meditation still operates within the confines of alpha waves, so if you fall asleep, I can show you the inside of my mind."

I sat down—on the cot and lay back slowly. "I don't—"

"You'll understand," Anberlin interjected. "Just remember, you're about to see the inside of *my* mind. Your mind might look different, so don't grow too attached."

Anberlin retreated to the center of the room, folded his legs, and closed

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his eyes. His breathing was deep, guttural, and surprisingly loud. I watched him for a moment, never once seeing his face twitch or his body stir.

I closed my eyes, wondering what Anberlin had in store for me. And then, I fell asleep.



I awoke in a simple barn. There was a horse stable, a chicken coop, a few cows, several pigs, and more animals milling about. Anberlin was in the corner with a dog, tugging a rope away from its mouth. He stopped when he noticed me and smiled.

I paused. This didn't feel any different from a regular dream.

"First, I'd like to remind you that you're asleep," Anberlin said. "Are you lucid?"

"I'm lucid," I said.

"Good. Now, you're not dreaming," he said, moving to the front of the barn. "You're sharing a meditation with me. Do you understand?"

I nodded.

"That means you're going to feel things that you're not used to," he continued, lifting the wooden bar that kept the barn gates latched. With a heft, he shunted it aside. "I'll be sharing my emotions with you. *All* my emotions. Are you okay with that?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Great. Now, without any further ado—" He pushed open the double doors, "—welcome to my mind."

Fierce sunlight swept in, shining upon a vast, green land. Entangled with each ray of sunshine was a burst of pride and joy. It burned with great intensity,

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and intuitively, I understood where it came from. Anberlin was proud to be a teacher, and his source of joy was in having a student. This sunshine was for me.

My gaze took in the rest of the prairie. It was rich with rolling hills, rabbits and critters, farm animals, and flowers. Beyond the foothills stood a large mountain with a gentle, rocky slope and a smooth river that graced its peak. Out to the west was a wide, vast ocean, and to the east a dense forest. I felt a sense of awe looking over the expanse.

“This land is me,” Anberlin said. “Every thought and feeling I am experiencing translates to something here. From the dirt, to the sun, to the forests, to the ocean—this is a perfect one-to-one representation of my mind. A reflection of my heart.”

“All of it?”

“All of it.”

“I don’t...” It was overwhelming. “I don’t understand.”

“Here, come with me.”

Anberlin stepped outside the barn and led me around the corner. There, we stumbled upon an expansive garden. A few dozen flowers, a row of vines, and a vegetable patch were sticking out of the soil. Deeper in the garden, a hundred more seeds were buried, waiting for their chance to grow.

“The plants in this garden represent my roots to various people and places,” Anberlin said, kneeling beside a patch of briars. “Some of these are nostalgia-ridden memories from as early as middle school. Some of these are related to family and friends. Some are for Mandala itself.”

He stood and turned to his farm.

“The animals have meaning too. The horses represent my desire for freedom. The cows represent my desire for tranquility. The puppy represents my desire to play.” Anberlin knelt and scratched behind the pup’s ears. “Isn’t that right? Yes, it is.”

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I closed my eyes and let the world hum around me. There were countless emotions I couldn't understand. Feelings I'd never felt. I tried to translate them, but it was like trying to describe a color I'd never seen. And like a new color, it was beautiful. Enigmatic. Special.

Yet, amongst the confusing array of feelings, there was one emotion I recognized clearly. On the wind, stirring from the forest, I recognized the feeling of mourning. Grief. Loss. It was an impossible feeling to mistake. But for whom—

I peered at Anberlin's hand, finding a wedding ring on his finger that had been absent in the real world. I smiled sadly.

The puppy barked and jumped around Anberlin. His tiny mouth latched onto his pant leg and pulled at him.

"Alright, *alright*," he said to the dog. "Well, Phillip, it's time for me to get going. I have plans with a friend and I'm afraid I can't work another minute. Are you ready to awaken?"

I wanted to stay longer. I wanted to understand him more. But before I could protest, he ended the meditation.



My eyes opened with great discomfort. The suddenness with which the vision ended left me disoriented. There was no endpoint or flash of light, just a moment where I entered back into my own noisy mind. I felt like I'd seen color TV for the first time only to go back home to my black and white set.

"How do I..." I drew a deep breath. "How do you feel all that?"

Anberlin rolled his neck and stretched his legs out. "Feel all what?"

At nineteen years old, I thought I'd experienced the full gamut of

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emotions, but in the past few minutes, I'd learned there were many, many more. There could be hundreds. Thousands. Millions, even. No amount of words could name them all. And if *those* emotions have always existed without me having felt them before—what else might be out there?

“How do I change who I am to feel the way you do?”

“So, we've advanced, yes? You no longer want to want to change. You want to change after all?” Anberlin raised his eyebrows.

I gave a subtle nod. “I'll do anything.”

“And that's exactly what you'll have to do,” Anberlin said. “The emotions come with experience. A lot of people avoid truly living in their attempt to stay comfortable. And what I've learned in life is that you grow more from fear, shame, and regret than you do from anything else. And so, I've made a habit of embracing suffering in controlled ways. So long as it's a choice paired with introspection, I've found that suffering is a good thing. You'll have to try everything—and fail at most of it. And then, you have to keep living despite that.”

“But how did you—”

“I don't mean to cut this short,” Anberlin said, “but I really do need to go. I want you to consider what it is you truly *want*. Think about it: you didn't know you wanted the tea until the suffering came knocking. You didn't know you wanted to change until I showed you what that would look like. It doesn't have to be that way. If you learn who you are and what you want, you'll never suffer from lucid confusion again. You'll be you across all situations, and you'll feel more alive than ever before. And while you might still suffer, how you feel about that suffering will change.” He moved to the door. “Do you understand?”

I nodded, but again, I wasn't sure I meant it.

I lay in bed that night with my eyes wide open. My eyes had adjusted to the

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darkness, and I could clearly see the texture of the ceiling. Hours of silence had passed, and I was no closer to discovering who I was. But the quiet environment shed light on my mistakes. All my them. The times I ran, the times I hid, the times I refused to share my feelings for fear of being judged. No more. I needed to do new things to get a new life.

And tomorrow, I would do just that. Instead of giving up, I needed to persevere. Instead of running, I needed to fight. Instead of hiding, I needed to get up, knock on Samson's door, and ask for forgiveness.

Why tomorrow? Why not today? Why not now?

I peered at the clock. It was past midnight; now wasn't the time. But I wanted to do something now, and I knew just what that could be. Carefully, I rolled out of bed, crossed my legs on the floor, and closed my eyes.

Breathe in... breathe out...

Chapter 24

One More... And One More...

THE NEXT MORNING, I showed up to class extra early. As I waited for Samson and Phoebe to arrive, I fidgeted incessantly, nervous they would choose new seats and shun me after yesterday's stunt. All my worry was for naught, however, as they took their normal seats around me. But things were more awkward than usual as Samson was giving me an obvious cold shoulder and Phoebe, after a brief hello, occupied her attention by pretending to organize her notes. I was tempted to rush to a resolution, but after reading the room, I gave them space and waited silently for class to begin.

"Good morning, everyone," Anberlin said, entering the classroom. "Please remove a sheet of paper and a pencil from your binders."

The class shuffled around, and when everyone was situated, Anberlin continued.

"For today's lesson, I'd like you all to write the number of pushups you *think* you can do."

After taking a moment, I wrote the number twenty. Though I wasn't trying to look at Phoebe, I saw she'd written twenty-two, so I felt like I was in a good range. But when I saw Samson's number, I stopped.

"Eighty-eight push-ups? Really?"

Samson shrugged without looking in my direction. I shied away, realizing I'd accidentally broken the silence between us. My mouth opened to apologize, but I caught myself. That would only make things worse.

"Good," Anberlin said. "Now, take your papers with you and find a comfortable place to push. Your goal is to surpass the number you've written. If you can push past the number on your sheet, you'll receive credit on your

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specialty placement exam. Don't settle for the bare minimum. Push yourself."

There was mild resistance from the class, but Anberlin ignored us. Instead of joining the ruffraff, I found an open area near the front of the room and lowered myself to the deck.

"Begin."

I pushed. Up-down-up-down-up. My arms moved on their own, and in less than a minute, I'd done nineteen push-ups. Up to this point, they had been easy, but now my muscles were burning. Straining myself, I lowered my body and tried to push one more, but my arms refused to straighten. Instinct took over, and I dropped to my knees.

Anberlin stepped toward me. "Keep going, Phillip."

I looked up at him doggedly and got back into the pushup position. After a deep breath, I lowered myself to the ground and pushed as hard as I could. With Anberlin watching, I was able to strain through the pain and do one last pushup. This time, I collapsed to the deck.

"I need you to do more."

"What? I don't think—"

"*More*, Phillip."

With shaking arms, I got back into a plank and tried for another rep. The tips of my fingers curled as they pressed into the tile, and my muscles burned as they ripped apart. I ignored this and pushed out another. That was twenty-one push-ups. Surely, it'd be enough.

"More."

I swallowed hard, growing angry. My face was flushed red—almost purple—yet I lowered my body again, rushing to get my chest to the ground. Then, I drove my body up. Weird guttural noises escaped my throat as my arms straightened, and at the height of my ascent, my arms gave out completely. I collapsed. I'd done twenty-two pushups now—this had to be the end.

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“Two more,” Anberlin pressed. “Two more and you can be done.”

I opened my mouth, then thought better of it. Sweat drained from my face as fire consumed my muscles, joints, and tendons. My abs burned as I straightened, and when I lowered my body next, it was more like falling than anything else. Then I pushed. I *really* pushed. No longer did I find strength in anger or adrenaline, but instead, I drew from a wellspring of desperation. I just wanted this to end.

This desperation carried me up to my twenty-third pushup. I only had one pushup remaining. The finality of it was motivating, and everything faded away so I could focus on this one last motion. I was keenly aware of salt on my tongue, but the rest of my body was so numb I couldn't feel anything. I felt like I held half a pushup for ten full seconds before I found the strength to finish.

I buckled immediately, plopping my cheek onto the cold tiling. This time, I was out for the count.

Anberlin scrunched his lips and thought for a moment. “I'm not convinced you're out of gas. One more.”

Gasping for breath, I looked up at him like he was mad.

“I can't,” I said on the tail end of a breath.

Anberlin knelt next to me and leaned close. “If I held a gun to your head, could you do one more?” He made a finger-gun with his hand and held it beside me. “One more, like it's life or death.”

Somehow, the vision of Anberlin standing over me with a gun caused the pain in my muscles to dull. My lungs filled with a painful breath. Blood pumped through my body. All my muscles protested, but I convinced myself: if I didn't do this, I would die. I was shaking and trembling. My whole body wanted me to stop, but I couldn't. Everything went blank. I'm not sure where the energy came from, but somehow, somehow, I finished the twenty-fifth pushup.

By now, my arms were twitching, my head felt light, and my body was

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drenched in sweat. For as bad as everything felt, however, I had to admit that I *liked* the feeling. My muscles radiated strength. My mind was perfectly clear. My body was flush with relief. It felt good in the same way rejection did. Objectively painful yet emotionally lightening.

“Do you believe you have one more in you?” Anberlin asked.

“Are... you... kidding? No.”

“What if I was holding a gun to someone else?” Anberlin asked.

“Someone you care about. How many more could you do to save them?”

I shot a dark look at Anberlin. My first thought was Phoebe, but no—as I looked at her, I realized she wasn’t the right person. She was just a crush—one I needed to get over too. No, I needed to picture someone I’ve loved for years—someone I loved more than myself. And there was only one person who matched that description: Grandpa.

Energy pulsed through me, and as quickly as I could, I did one more pushup. Somehow, this one was easy, so I did another for good measure. And another to spite him. Then, I looked up and *dared* Anberlin to ask for one more.

“Alright,” Anberlin said, curling a smile. “The difference between those who will bend the world to their will and those who will be consumed by it is reflected in the way that they push. You must not be afraid to push until death, because one day, it *will* be life or death. And when that point comes, you’re going to need to push as many times as it takes to survive. For now, however, you can rest.”

Relieved, I finally felt the energy slip away. As I lay on the cold floor, I eyed Samson, who had just completed his sixty-seventh pushup and was still going strong. Anberlin moved over to encourage him, giving him the same treatment he’d just given me. In response to Anberlin’s encouragement, Samson pushed himself the same way I did. Veins popped out of his forehead. His arms bulged as they tore. Sweat coated his body. By the end of his set, he ended up performing over a hundred pushups.

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As he recovered on the floor, he glanced my way, but his eyes averted again before I could flash a smile. Pain took hold of my heart, and I wondered if we could ever be friends again.

Anberlin made his way around the classroom, encouraging each student to surpass their boundaries. Some were able to surpass their wildest expectations while others refused to struggle past the first iota of pain. Not everyone was able to do what Samson and I had done, and I felt good about that. By the end of the exercise, most of the class was face-down on the floor and breathing heavy.

“Now you know what willpower requires,” Anberlin said, reaching for the mela gas thermostat. “We’ll continue our lesson in the dream world. If you’d like to sleep at your desks, now is the time to move.”

Nobody did.

“Fair enough,” Anberlin said, taking a seat as the first wisp of gas reached him. “Get comfy. This one’s gonna get messy.”



Chapter 25

The First Brick

AS EACH STUDENT FELL asleep in the real world, they *popped* into a new room—an auditorium suitable for a large class. I gained lucidity right away, partially because I was desperate to never struggle with lucidity again.

Anberlin was one of the last to pop into the dream. He looked around to gain his bearings before taking his place atop the stage. “Is everyone here?”

We muttered a collective affirmation.

“Good. We got lucky with the setting.” He fidgeted with the lectern and leaned against its surface. “Props to whoever fell asleep first with academics on their mind. Now, let’s begin by discussing what it takes to build something in the real world.”

I joined the rest of the classroom in the auditorium chairs and focused hard to keep my conscious mind active.

“In the real world, creation begins with imagination,” Anberlin said. “Imagine you want to build a house. You spend years planning until you have a complete understanding of what you want. You know how many bedrooms and bathrooms there are, where each outlet is located, and what objects go in which places. Everything is mapped out in the blueprint. Now, this may seem like a stupid question, but with this blueprint, do you *actually* have a house?”

The class muttered a collective, “No.”

“No, of course not, because creation doesn’t *stop* at imagination; it *starts* there. That was what we learned in our last lesson. So now, once you have your blueprint, you’ll have to work to build the house you imagined. In dreams, this work is done by draining a part of your spirit—the same part of your spirit that pushes you to your limits. It literally taps into your willpower to fuel the

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manifestation. And the more you want to build, the more willpower you need. So, let's start building a house."

Anberlin held out his hand, and a brick appeared. He placed it on the ground and nestled it into the dirt. Then he imagined another brick and placed it beside the first. Brick by brick, he built a small wall.

"So, each brick takes a small amount of willpower from my body," Anberlin said. "I can make a hundred bricks and arrange them all into a wall. Then, I can make a hundred walls and construct a house. What are some problems with this technique?"

A girl in the middle of the room raised her hand. "It takes too long."

Anberlin nodded, then called on a guy in the front. "It's inefficient."

"Two-for-two," Anberlin said. "In the real world, there's no good way around this. But in dreams, we can take shortcuts. Instead of creating a single brick, I can use one-hundred times the willpower to make the whole wall."

Anberlin focused his mind and tightened his muscles. Two seconds later, a small wall appeared behind Anberlin. He drew a deep breath to compose himself.

"See, the more you make at once—" he paused to breathe, "—the more energy it requires. What's the problem here?"

Samson raised his hand. "If you're not ready to build the whole wall, it'll drain too much of your spirit."

"Good," Anberlin said. "If you don't have enough willpower, you won't be able to make the wall. So, how do you develop your willpower?"

"You use it," Samson called out.

"Exactly. It grows the same way a body does. Imagine a person who can lift ten pounds a hundred times—and now imagine a person who can lift a thousand pounds at once. Those are very different people, aren't they? They're both lifting a thousand pounds, but the first person is doing it brick by brick; the second as a complete wall. The big problem with the metaphor is that, with

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fitness, the body will adapt to a certain point—but the mind has no such limit. Samson, would you help me demonstrate our first task?”

Samson swaggered to the front of the room and jumped onto the stage.

“One day, Samson, your thoughts will create bridges and buildings, but all those creations will begin with a single brick. I want you to create this brick, the first of many.” He placed his hand on Samson’s shoulder and lowered his voice. “I know you’ve only made sticks, but it’s closely related, I promise. Close your eyes, and I’ll walk you through it.”

Samson obeyed.

“To start, you’ll need to picture a brick in your mind.”

Samson furrowed his brow and a semi-translucent brick hovered in the air before us.

“Now, you’re going to make that brick into something tangible. You need to feel as though you’re constructing it with your hands and molding it with your fingers. You need to feel like you’re pulling clay out of a riverbed and shaping it in your fingers. You will feel some discomfort as you do this. Pain, even. This is your body’s response to hard work. Ignore the feeling. Willpower means never giving up.”

Samson’s muscles quivered and pulsed as the brick began to take form. The translucent quality of it flickered away, and in its place was a real, physical object. With a burst of energy, the brick fell to the ground as a fully formed mass.

Anberlin picked the brick up and dusted it off. “Very good. Today, it’s bricks. Tomorrow, it’s whatever your mind can imagine.”

For the first time, I saw Samson’s breath waver.

“Excuse me, professor?” A student in the front raised their hand. “If all the physical laws remained intact during shared dreams, like momentum and sharpness, then how can we create something from nothing? Doesn’t that break the law of energy conservation?”

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I shuffled in my seat, finding the padding to be too thin for what was becoming a long lecture.

“Great question,” Anberlin said, gesturing for Samson to find a seat with the rest of the class. “There’s no easy answer. Some theorize that creation differs from the other physical laws in an important way. Something like gravity starts from the physical world and is inflicted upon the person; but creation starts from within the person and is inflicted upon the world. That might make it different. Still, others believe matter *can* be created from nothing, citing the fact that the universe had to come from *somewhere*. There is some evidence to support this conjecture too, but nothing concrete.”

“Which one do you believe?” the student asked.

Anberlin considered his response. “I believe the truth lies somewhere between. The law of conservation of energy states you can convert energy into matter so long as the conversion is zero-sum. Conveniently, willpower is a form of energy. Thus, it follows that creation is the conversion of willpower into matter. But where does willpower come from? Well... the universe must’ve come from something, right? If you follow the chain back far enough, you’ll eventually conclude that energy and matter emerged from nothing, and that we simply don’t have the physics to understand how yet. Any other questions?”

Phoebe raised her hand, then looked at the ground to find the right words. “I have more of a concern, actually. If you can create anything and it appears somewhere before you, then what’s stopping you from creating something... *inside* another person? Is that something to be worried about?”

Anberlin nodded and smiled, proud of her question.

“No, there’s no need to worry about that, Phoebe. While you’re correct in saying that a created object will appear where you imagine it, it *is* a natural law that two things cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Because of that, you’ll never be able to just *pop* something inside someone else.”

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Phoebe nodded, satisfied with his answer. Samson nodded alongside her, but his was more of a resigned disappointment.

“Anything else?”

Nobody moved.

“Good. Then we’re going to move to our hands-on exercise. You may work alone or in groups, but I want to see what you can make. Make something simple. A stick, a stone, a brick—whatever your heart desires. I’ll be by to guide you.”

I didn’t bother trying to join Phoebe and Samson. Instead, I stood and moved to the back of the room to work alone. Progress was slow. I pictured a stick, but it disappeared as fast as it’d appeared in my mind. A stone in my mind’s eye had the consistency of sand. Nothing I imagined had any heft to it.

By the time an hour had passed, Samson was across the room making entire rows of bricks while Phoebe was decorating them with realistic flowers. And despite Anberlin proving I had an untapped wellspring of willpower deep within my soul, it seemed to have drained away by now. With my spirit depleted, it occurred to me that I was too tired, and that I should give up.

But that was the old me. No. I couldn’t do that now. Dejected, despairing, worn-out, and tired, I made the decision to refocus and make this stupid brick.

And just as I felt I was making progress, the dream ended.



I woke up on the floor. My neck was stiff as I hadn’t moved from the push-ups. Worse, my arms and chest were tight in a way I’d never felt before. My body felt like it weighed a thousand pounds, and I had to curl into a ball before I could lift myself to my feet. Looking around, I found the bleary eyes of those

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around me to be proof that nobody felt good.

“Ah, there you all are,” a familiar voice sounded from the front of the room.

“Welcome Teddy,” Anberlin greeted, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. “What brings you here?”

“I came to extend an invitation,” Teddy said.

“Oh?” Anberlin smiled. “Is it already time?”

Teddy nodded excitedly and faced the class. “As many of you already know, each year, Mandala has the honor of hosting the Worldwide Research Symposium for the Coalescence Sciences within Lucity. The symposium is in two weeks. This event brings hundreds—thousands—of dreamers to our campus where we share our findings on cutting-edge research. Being that it’s hosted here, you’re all invited to attend.”

There was buzz around the room, and Samson was telling anyone who would listen they should go.

“Are you allowed to announce this year’s topic?” Anberlin asked.

“This year’s topic is astral projection,” Teddy said. “A new alpha wave technique pioneered by Nate Logan.”

Samson’s eyes glimmered. His dad was going to be the center of the event.

But I was distracted by something else. Grandpa told me he was only able to visit me because of a secret technique, one which would be unveiled during the symposium. Was this the technique he was talking about? Would I be seeing Grandpa more often, then? My heart swelled with hope.

“Now, Anberlin—” Teddy’s tone turned conversational, “—seeing as this is going to be a large event, I’m going to need help setting up. I was hoping you could put class on hold for a couple weeks so we can construct the venue.”

“Of course.”

“Great,” Teddy said, clapping his hands together. “Well, that’s all I have today. I’ll see you all at the symposium. Carry on.” With a quick wave, he left

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the classroom.

Immediately, the class broke out into excited murmurs.

“Two weeks without class?” Phoebe whispered to Samson, horrified.

“I know. Isn’t it great?” he beamed back.

But I was with Phoebe. There was so much work I had to do to catch up with the class—how would I do it without Anberlin? I’d have to... I’d have to just figure it out, I guess.

“Alright, alright, bring it in,” Anberlin said. “You all should know me well enough to know I have a plan for this. It’s time for a group project. Your mission is to go to Lucity and create *something*. Anything. You have two weeks to test your limits. My only restriction is that you must work in groups of three—no more, and no less.”

I looked up at Anberlin in horror, but he redirected my gaze toward Samson and Phoebe. I shook my head an inch. There was no way they’d—

“Hey, Phillip,” Phoebe started, “do you want to work with us?”

I paused, stunned.

“Uh, is Samson okay with it?”

Samson grunted indifferently, which was as close to an affirmation as I was going to get.

“Then, yeah,” I said. “I’d love to.”

“Great. Let’s meet tonight in Lucity to pick a place to build and get started.”

While I remained calm on the outside, I was panicking on the inside. Were they making amends? Pretending nothing happened? What did this mean?

The class ended, and I lagged behind the other students who were already bouncing ambitious ideas off one another, from coliseums to ocean temples. Phoebe and Samson were walking slowly ahead of me, and I knew it was time to do something very important. Something the old me would never do. I quickened my pace and tapped Samson on the shoulder. He faced me with

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hollow eyes.

“What?” he said coldly.

“I—” I paused, feeling a lump in my throat. Then, I swallowed it. “I wanted to say that I’m sorry. I’m sorry for kissing Phoebe. I was confused, and tired, and—” I sighed, “—and none of that is a valid excuse. I made a mistake, and I’m *really* sorry.”

Samson remained silent for a moment. “How’s your face?”

I rubbed it tenderly, feeling the bruise on my cheek. “It hurts. A lot.”

“Good,” he said. “Listen, I talked to Anberlin, and he explained lucid confusion. Said you weren’t really present. Is that true?”

“Yeah.”

“I talked with Phoebe, too. She said that you both want to be friends, and only friends. Is that true, too?”

I nodded.

“Okay, then, I’ll forgive you,” Samson said, straightening his posture. “But only if you let me hit you again.”

“What?”

“One more knock.” He tapped his own cheek twice and pointed at me.

I paused. The request came as a shock, but once the surprise faded, I smirked. “Fine.” I closed my eyes and presented my cheek. “One more.”

I tightened, anticipating a flash of pain, but it never came. Instead, Samson laughed.

“Relax, Phil,” he said, his voice now warm and vibrant. “I’m not going to hit you. The fact that you’d let me says a lot about you, though. You know what, man? We’re cool, okay?”

I opened my eyes and felt my shoulders soften. “Alright.”

“Now listen, I only accept apologies once, so don’t waste it.” He turned away and locked hands with Phoebe. After a step, he stopped and faced me again. “I’ll see you at Lucity tonight.”

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With that, Samson left, and I felt infinitely lighter. I didn't know what to call it, but I was certain that I was feeling a new emotion. This feeling was short-lived, though, as I felt a vibration from my pocket. Out of nowhere, I'd received a text from Grandpa.

See you tonight.

Chapter 26

The Merryweather

WHEN I STARTED DREAMING, Grandpa was the first thing I saw. The surge of adrenaline made me lucid right away, and I beamed a smile as he approached. Between us was a rocky floor bordered by a green pasture, and I ran forward to meet him halfway. Once in arm's distance, we popped off with our secret handshake, ending with the usual *snap*.

As the handshake ended, I turned my attention to our surroundings and got a better look at things. We were at the edge of a cliffside, high against a foreign world. Water toppled off the nearby cliff and trickled down the side of a rock wall, crashing into a large lake which was surrounded by bushes, trees, vines, flowers, fungus, moss, and dense, tangled flora. It was early golden hour, so the whole horizon was bathed in yellow light. Somehow, I felt comfortable, like I'd been in this place before. It all carried the weight of nostalgia—but from memories I didn't have.

I faced Grandpa and smiled. "What are you doing here?"

"I missed you, and I wanted to see how you're doing." Grandpa looked me over and nodded. "How's Mandala?"

I shrugged. Between the awkwardness with Phoebe, the fight with Samson, and the struggles I'd been having with creation, it wasn't all good. On the other hand, between the private lessons with Anberlin, the blossoming friendship with Aurora, and the forgiveness I'd received, it wasn't all bad either.

"Good," I concluded.

"Good?" Grandpa gave me a knowing look.

"I don't know. It's been a mixed bag, really. I don't know how to feel about it all."

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Grandpa squeezed his lips together, searching his memory. “I think I have something that can help.”

“Really?”

“Really. I just have to remember how it’s made. See, back in my research days, I invented something that serves as a sort of emotional compass. Let me think...”

Grandpa closed his eyes. A few seconds later, he was holding a lotus-looking flower, but the petals were dark orange, vibrating with the cadence of fire, growing fast and burning away at the edges. I peered closer and found the center to be a deep, unfathomable core reminiscent of a black hole.

“What is it?”

“It’s a merryweather,” Grandpa said, holding it closer to me. “Think of it like a mood ring. The inside reflects your internal world, while the outside reflects the way you’re presenting yourself to others. It was the first of what we now call impossible artifacts. Here, hold it.”

Grandpa tried to shuffle the flower into my hand, but I was unprepared and dropped it. As it fluttered to the ground, it shifted from its fiery state into a regular pink lotus, indistinguishable from any other.

“Sorry,” I muttered, rushing to pick it up, scraping my fingers on the rocky surface. “Did I ruin it?”

“No. That’s just what it does when it’s at peace. In fact, the lotus form is what it shows if everything’s balanced inside you. One day, I hope that’s what it shows for me.”

My fingers gripped the flower, and I stood. My heart beat once, twice through the stem, and then the whole thing changed appearance. The outer petals transitioned to a gray color and hardened like cement; the core burst alive with lightning and rain.

“It was prettier when you were holding it,” I joked.

Grandpa laughed and eyed the flower, searching it for secrets.

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“This is cool,” I said. “How do you make one?”

“Oh, it’s easy. You just have to *understand* all the facets of life.”

I looked up at him quizzically and gently shook my head. “What does that mean?”

“For me, it means I’ve lived,” Grandpa said. “And in a way, I’ve also died. I’ve seen miracles, endured tragedies. I’ve...” Grandpa looked above me as though he could see something I couldn’t. “I’ve empathized with monsters and held contempt for saints. I’ve visited the deepest regions of my mind, scoured the darkest caves of my soul; I’ve enjoyed a thousand victories and endured a million failures. And at the end of it all, I’ve come out of it with something unique. I’ve earned an *understanding*.”

“So, can you understand what the flower is trying to say about me?”

Grandpa lifted his chin and peered inside. “What do you think?”

I looked over the merryweather and gave it true thought. Inside, I was a chaotic mess, which made sense. But the outside? Cement? Was I putting up a front and hiding my true emotions?

I mean, of course I was. How did I not see it before?

We spent a moment in silence, the only sound being the rushing of the nearby waterfall. I paid it no mind and rolled the flower’s stem in my hand. With each thought that rattled through my mind, it made a micro-adjustment to the petals. For a moment, I thought of Anberlin and took a breath in to clear my thoughts. The grayish petals turned pink—but only barely. It was so subtle I may have been imagining it. But as I considered it further, the petals most certainly darkened to a deeper shade of gray.

“You know, I’m a little hurt,” Grandpa said in an exaggerated, jokey manner. “I thought the flower would turn solid gold the moment you saw me.”

I chuckled, and a hairline fracture cut through one of the petals.

“That’s better.” Grandpa smiled warmly. “Now, look. I won’t ask you to share anything you don’t want to, but I *am* curious. How’s class been?”

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My lips tightened, and the hairline fracture instantly sealed itself. Noticing my guard was up, I took a moment to fight against my impulses. I drew a deep breath, and the petals opened slightly once again.

“I’m struggling,” I admitted. “I can’t seem to create anything.”

“Well, what are you trying to make?” Grandpa said.

“A brick,” I said. “A stupid brick. But... I just can’t get it. I can’t imagine it. I can’t will it into existence. I can’t do anything right.”

“Well, maybe I can help.”

Grandpa held out his hand, and a brick appeared in his grasp. It was instantaneous and effortless, and the merryweather in my hand stiffened tighter.

“Tell me, what do you *experience* when you see this brick?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “What do you mean by experience? Are you asking what I see?”

“I want you to guess. What comprises experience?”

It seemed like a nonsensical question. “It’s a brick. It’s reddish. It’s coarse. It smells like a rock. What’s there to experience?”

“Ah, I see.” Grandpa turned away from me and gestured toward the brilliant sunlit expanse. “Let’s try something different. Look out and tell me everything you experience about the sunset sky.”

I looked over the world. My eyes scanned the clouds, and I took in the view. “Uh, I don’t know. I like the colors, I guess. Orange, pink, purple, blue...”

“No, no. I’m not asking you to describe what you see—I’m asking you to describe what you *experience*. What you understand about the world as it is.”

I shrugged, trying to find the answer he was looking for. “I’m experiencing a sunset. A cold breeze, I guess.”

“Ehh.” Grandpa shook his head. “If I couldn’t see, or smell, or feel, what would you tell me to help me understand the world?”

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“I don’t know, man.” The merryweather grew heavier in my hand. “The air smells clean. It feels cold. Uhm... It’s just the world. It is what it is.”

“Facts. It’s all just facts. I can tell you all the facts myself.” Grandpa pointed out to the sky with the brick cupped in his hand. “The sun is beneath the clouds, lighting up their undersides. It smells like pine and oak, so we’re in a northern latitude. The air tastes of salt, so I’d bet there’s an ocean on the other side of this cliff face. Would you like a temperature readout? A record of the wind speed? Atmospheric pressure? Would any of that really matter to you?”

I was impressed by how much he noticed about the world, but I was confused about the way he described it all to me.

“Look, you could tune yourself to all five senses and think you understand the world,” Grandpa said, softening his tone, “but haven’t you realized that there’s more to being human than the five senses? It’s like hearing versus listening—and if you’re not actively listening, you’ll miss something deeper. Even in listening to you, I can feel your energy wax and wane. I can comprehend the way you’ve matured. I can sense that you’re walking taller than you were a couple of weeks ago—even though you haven’t grown an inch. I just know that our relationship has grown a tiny bit distant and that we need this time to rekindle our connection. I understand that which is why I’m here. And now, by *listening* to you, I don’t just see bare facts, like how you’re struggling to make a brick; I get to experience your frustration, and what’s falling short.”

I shrugged halfway. A part of me got his point, but a different part of me wasn’t sure I was getting it. “So, what are you asking me to understand?”

Grandpa chuckled. “Surely, you recognize all this, don’t you?”

I looked out over the fading sunset and shook my head.

“Look closely.”

There came a feeling that I was missing something, but I couldn’t put my

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finger on it. The world felt like I'd baked a cake but missed a step. I shook my head again, not sure what I was supposed to be seeing.

"The sky is the exact same hue as the day you caught your first big fish in the pond," Grandpa said. "The smells are the same as a winter drive between your house and mine. The ocean salts are the tang of fries from the diner we went to after your graduation. And this brick?" He held the brick at eye level. "This brick is the exact one Grandma and I would use to prop open our front door when you came to visit."

I smiled and gazed over the world with a fresh perspective. Until he mentioned it, I hadn't noticed the familiarity looming in each corner of the world. But now, knowing what the world was, it made me feel... whole. The merryweather lightened and unraveled.

"Now, when you look at this—" Grandpa repositioned the brick between us, "—I want to know what makes it unique to you. More than a picture in your mind, more than a physical object—what is it about *bricks* that makes them yours?"

I sighed, answerless.

"At some point in your life," Grandpa said, "someone shared a brick with you, and because of that, your brain now has a neuron that lights up when you see one. What's *the brick* that made that happen? What's *your* brick?"

I shrugged.

"Just talk," he said. "Talk about bricks until there's nothing left to say."

"Okay. So, bricks, right? They're longer than they are wide? Stuff like that?"

"Just keep talking."

"Okay. Uh, bricks are a small part of bigger things."

"What does that mean?" Grandpa pressed.

"I can, uh, build things with a brick. I can create bigger things from lots of bricks."

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“Close your eyes. Keep going.”

“They’re fairly heavy,” I said. “I can throw them. I can place them. I can break them. I can stack bricks and make a tower. I can lay them out to make a wall. I can arrange them into buildings.”

“Go on.”

“There are bricks in my workplace. My old high school was built from bricks. Our old house was built from bricks. The walls, the driveway, the fireplace—all bricks.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” I said, my voice drifting as my memories carried me to comfort. “You know, I used to love the fireplace the most. You and I used to talk there, and every time we did, I’d stare at the bricks. There was one in particular, just above the mantel, that had two little ruts in it. Any time I needed space to think, I’d stare at that brick, and answers would come.”

Deep in my memories, I could see it so clearly. I paused, expecting Grandpa to urge me to continue, but he didn’t. Instead, he told me to open my eyes. Between us floated a glittery, translucent brick with two ruts in the side. It wasn’t just *like* the brick in the mantel—it was the exact brick from the mantel.

“You forgot what bricks were for,” Grandpa said. “It’s nearly impossible to imagine something that’s not special to you. Beyond sight, taste, and touch, imagination requires experience. It requires you to *understand* what you are making.”

As he spoke, I revisited my memories of the fireplace and watched the brick spark in and out of existence. Suddenly, it was effortless.

“Now that you can imagine it, you need to will it into existence,” Grandpa said. “Trust that the energy is already within you. Can you feel the way your heart pumps? The way your lungs inflate? The fibers in your arms? The immaterial substance of your soul? Pull that energy out from the depths of

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your body and let it manifest into matter.”

I kept my mind attuned to the things I felt, living briefly through my senses once again. But I didn't feel the humidity or hear the waterfall; I imagined what it was like to be holding a brick.

“As you get closer to success—” Grandpa said, “—you'll feel as though you're molding the brick with your fingers. You'll grow weary like you've been working in a riverbed all day. Allow it to happen.”

I didn't know what he meant, but I did my best to imagine myself in a river. My ears tuned to the nearby waterfall, and I tricked myself into believing it was the sound of a gushing river. And as water rushed past, I knelt beneath the surface and scooped red clay from the bottom. My legs grew weak as I resisted being swept away, and my fingers were numb from sifting through muck. My body vibrated in pain, and I felt as though I were doing a dozen push-ups all at once. Memories of the brick coalesced in my head, and carefully, I placed the spirit of those memories into the brick itself. And with this final step, a solid brick appeared in the air before me.

Grandpa caught it as it fell to the ground. “Congratulations, Phillip,” he said, holding the brick up for me to see. “You've created your first brick.”

Almost immediately, the pain in my body dissipated, and as my mouth curled to a genuine smile, the shell of the merryweather blossomed.

Grandpa beamed with pride. “You can have anything you want in this world as long as you understand what bricks are required to build it. And remember this well: Everything is a brick. A sandwich is built from ingredients, a painting is built from its palette, and a book is built from its words. The world is little more than a set of bricks, and the more you learn the parts, the more you'll make a whole. And one day, when you've collected enough small moments of life experience, you'll have the bricks required to make a merryweather of your own.”

I peered out at the world again, seeing what it was for the first time. This

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was a handcrafted playground for me. A piece of art for me. A reflection of Grandpa's love for me. And as I took it in—this time every part of it—I found so much more than pretty colors in the sky, even as the black endpoint expanded from a corner and ate away at the universe. The end of the dream was upon us.

“Thank you, Grandpa.” I dropped the merryweather, letting it return to its natural form as an ordinary lotus flower, and gave Grandpa a tight hug. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Phillip.”

Darkness.



Chapter 27

The Mole

I WOKE UP, SATISFIED. Finally, I'd done it—I'd created something. As I rolled aside, I dangled my feet over the edge of my bed and smiled. It was nice to have seen Grandpa, and I hoped this would be the start of many more visits.

Then, I caught wind of the time, and my anxiety rushed back. I was fifteen minutes late to meet Samson and Phoebe in Lucy. After a moment of back-and-forth panic, I slammed a shirt over my torso, jammed a toothbrush around my mouth, and bolted out of my room. The hallways were empty as I ran. It was the quietest part of the night, so only the workaholics were still awake, making it an easy path to the elevator. The silver doors opened with an eerie creak, and I hurried inside. As it hummed its way deeper underground, I sank into a more level-headed state. My smile crept back as I pictured the dimpled brick one last time. That was it. That was *my* brick. Knowing what I know now, what else could I make?

The elevator jolted sideways to distance itself from the main compound, then slowed to a stop. The doors opened, and I jogged into the room. Samson and Phoebe—where were they?

Level Two was mostly empty, save for a few high-level officials who were probably using the dead of night to file paperwork and prepare for the symposium. A green light washed over the room, and the purple brain hovered in the middle like something out of a horror film. I ignored it and searched the rows of empty cots for signs of life. Samson and Phoebe were tucked into beds just beyond the central column. I jumped into a bed beside them and breathed mela gas until it drowned me in sleep.

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I awoke in the shadows of Lucy's impossibly tall skyscrapers. My eyes shifted around the world as I gained my bearings. It was the very end of the day, and the sun was moments from dipping beyond the horizon. There was nothing in all directions, and I deflated. How was I going to find Samson and Phoebe in this infinite landscape?

"I'm so stupid," I whispered, craning my neck to the sky.

You alright there?

I flinched, surprised by the strange voice that forced itself into my brain. I turned in a circle, but nobody was nearby. Then I remembered: this was the same voice I'd heard last time I was here. It'd been weeks, but I remembered the tone. Where was it coming from, though?

"Uh, yeah, I'm good," I replied, feeling self-conscious that someone might be lurking nearby.

You don't sound good. Can I help?

How much did this voice know?

"Uh, maybe. Did a guy and a girl come through here a few minutes ago and scamper off together?" It was a long shot, but if anyone would know...

Oh, yeah, the voice said. Are you looking for them?

My breath felt lighter. Finally, something was going my way.

"I am."

They went north. Just keep marching, and I'll tell you when to turn.

I marked the location of the sun, spun on my heel, and took off.

"Thanks for your help. Uh, who are you anyway?"

I'm Lucy. At least, that's what they call me now that I'm a brain in a vat.

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“What did they call you before? When you were—” I thought for a moment, “—a person in a body?”

I... I don't remember.

“So, like... are you alive?”

There was a moment of silence. No response in my head. And then: ***What does that mean to you? Alive?***

“Like, are you a person?” I brushed my fingers along the bars of a fence as I moved deeper into the city. My insides were tight, and I couldn't shake the feeling that cities this big shouldn't be so empty.

Maybe, the voice said. ***I don't have a body, if that's what you mean.***

“But do you have—” I was planning to ask if he had a soul, but what would that mean?

Turn right and cut between the next two buildings.

I followed his instruction and cut down the back of an alleyway. The walls were tight around me, and I wondered why Samson and Phoebe headed this way.

“So, you don't have a body, but you do have thoughts, right? Wouldn't that make you alive?”

Do you need thoughts to be alive? The voice paused. ***You can't think under anesthesia, but you're not dead while under, are you?***

“I guess not. But—”

Left.

I turned, finding a wide road in an even more desolate part of the city. Here, the buildings were weathering away. A hundred signs lined both sides of the road, advertising all manner of closed establishments. The creak of a wooden sign sounded off in the wind, advertising a saloon that was barred forever. A dozen neon lights were flickering to death, all hovering over empty stores with empty shelves. Loud club music thumped from one particularly large room, but nobody was there to dance. I stepped across the cobblestone

road with clenched fists, half-expecting a zombie to jump out from one of the rusting muscle cars that sat in a dozen faded parking spots.

“But you’re *not* under anesthesia,” I challenged. “So we don’t have to consider such a fringe case. You think, and that makes you alive, right?”

Well... The voice trailed off, sounding distracted by something. Then, it came back just as strong as before. *What is thinking anyway? What’s your definition?*

“It’s like... the ability to make new ideas.” I stepped around a pothole in the sidewalk and leapt over a broken fragment of concrete.

Is that the marker for life? It doesn’t work for plants. It doesn’t work for most animals. I mean, even artificial intelligence can write new novels, draw new blueprints, and develop new ideas. It can even beg for its life in a thousand new ways. But is A.I. alive?

“Well, no. Of course not.”

Why not?

“A.I. is just an input-output machine. It simply chooses the optimal next word based on the context of the conversation.”

And isn’t that what you do? If your output isn’t random—and it isn’t since you’re speaking coherently—then your words are chosen to be optimal according to the society you live in, aren’t they? With each word, you’re presenting yourself as an idea, a character. You’ve been taught which words are from high-society, and which terms are low-class slang—and even if you want to say the same thing to two audiences, you’ll say it one way at a job interview and one way with your friends. You have a code that you run depending on your input and training. How is that different from A.I.?

“I suppose I don’t know.” The sun had now entirely disappeared, and it was pitch black save for scattered light pollution. “Okay, then. Are you saying you’re an A.I.?”

I’m saying that I’m nothing more than a program running a script inside

of a box—and maybe you are too. And if that's true, then who programmed you? And what would it take to break free from your script. To become alive?

This was not the conversation I was expecting to have when I fell asleep. A moment ago, I considered myself alive, but now, I was half-convinced I was a computer.

“Would breaking free mean changing my fate?” I asked.

Now you're asking the right question. Nobody knows. You're almost there, by the way. Take a right and you'll start hearing your friends.

“What about—”

Give me a second. I'll be right back.

I turned deeper into the city, moving out of the streetlights. What were Samson and Phoebe planning? And why were they planning it here, a mile deep into the abandoned city?

Their voices started echoing, and I quickened my pace. But as the conversation gained clarity, I realized there'd been a mistake. I hadn't been taken to Samson and Phoebe.

I'd been led to Teddy and Dr. Delphi.

I readied myself to explain the mix-up when their conversation stopped me short. Something in their tone struck me as hostile, and I pressed up against the wall, deep in a shadow.

“—enough,” Teddy said, his voice stern but hushed. “For the last time, I need you to tell me where to find Henry Wolfe, or I'm going to turn you in.”

“If I knew, I'd tell you,” Dr. Delphi said, her voice characteristically flat. “The library has shown me nothing. Henry's staying off the grid, and he's smart enough to do it forever.”

“You're lying,” Teddy insisted. “Mandala has a mole who knows more about the inner workings of this place than I do—and they're feeding that information to Night Corps. Now riddle me this, Ursula—who might know more about Mandala than I? Who could *possibly* learn about conversations

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taking place in the Situation Room when it's so locked down?"

"It could be anyone," Dr. Delphi said. "Maybe someone is dreaming the future and isn't reporting it."

My breath was heavy, and I opened my mouth wider to obscure the sound it made.

"Or *maybe* it's someone who has unrestricted access to the world's most extensive prophetic library. Maybe *you're* the someone dreaming the future without reporting it. Maybe you've advanced your research on transcendence and—"

"I would never," Dr. Delphi said. She tried to sound neutral, but there was an undeniable venom in her final word.

"Well, think about it. Such a person might not need to be physically present at my private discussions to know what's being said there. And I can't think of anyone who might be able to know better than you. You're the only person who could learn the kind of sensitive information they're getting, *and* you're the only person who could hide sensitive information—like Henry's location—from me. You, with that library from hell."

"You need that library, and you need *me* to divine what the future holds."

"Oh, like you did with the epoch?" Teddy scoffed.

"I did my part," Dr. Delphi said. "The false epoch was because of Cassandra Wolfe and her hubris with transcendence."

"Right. We just happened to run out of files at the same time we were about to get Thanatos. How convenient."

Thanatos again. Who was this guy?

"And now he's threatening to return," Teddy continued. "Look, I'm a logical guy, Ursula, and things aren't adding up. You're hiding files from me."

"I'm not hiding—"

"Only three soldiers came back last night!" Teddy erupted. "We sent out nine hunters and six of them are *dead*. Because of you! You gave me *just enough*

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intel to know where Night Corps was hiding, but not enough to win against them. War is here, and you're sending good men to their deaths."

"You know it doesn't work like that." Dr. Delphi's voice cracked as she strained harder to bottle her emotions. "Precognitors only dream events that cannot be changed. You can only react to the information I present—you cannot change it. So, if my people dream it, it will happen. Period."

"Don't give me that. Once I gather enough evidence to prove you're passing information to the Night Corps, I'll—" Teddy paused.

"You'll what?" Dr. Delphi asked.

Teddy drew in a breath, letting his emotions simmer. There was a long pause where I considered peeking around the corner to see what he was doing, but his voice came back before I stirred up the courage.

"You know, Mrs. Delphi—"

"Doctor," she corrected.

Teddy ignored her. "You used to be honorable. Back when James was alive."

"You leave him out of this."

"You hide behind your title to forget what it was like to—"

"I go by doctor because I earned the title," Dr. Delphi interjected.

"You go by doctor to erase your past!" Teddy boomed, his voice filling every inch of the space around him, masking the gasp I made from the shadows. "Every time I call you Mrs., I'm hoping it'll remind you of what you were like when James was alive. When you were faithful to us and our mission."

There was a sharp smack followed by Teddy's deep grunt.

"How dare you," Dr. Delphi growled. "How dare you come to me with accusations of aiding the return of Thanatos, after what he did. After how he *murdered* my *husband*, you unrepentant asshole."

Teddy chuckled, and I started shaking.

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“You know,” Teddy said, “I was really hoping you’d do the right thing on your own. I was trying to help you, you know.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means the board put me up to this conversation.”

“You’re a bad liar, Teddy.”

“I’m serious. They wanted information from you. They wanted information *on* you.” Teddy sighed, as if rethinking himself. “Look, here’s the truth: we found Henry a week ago. Or rather, he found us. He wanted to come to the symposium to see his research debut. Astral projection was his baby before it became Mr. Logan’s, after all.”

“I already said you’re a bad liar,” Dr. Delphi said. “I thought our friendship might be worth more than your political games. But history repeats, I suppose.”

“I swear I’m telling the truth.”

“In that case, it looks like you came here to taunt me for being a widow.”

“I came here to clear you of being our mole,” Teddy said. “Had you told me where to find Henry, you would’ve been in the clear. Now, though?”

“I don’t believe you,” Dr. Delphi said, her voice deadpan again. “Nobody has had a prophecy of Henry’s attendance at the symposium. Such a move would warrant a dream.”

“Not if we were good about preventing a scene,” Teddy said. “Nobody will know he’s there. The only reason I’m telling you this is because *I* trust you, even when *others* do not. But if something bad happens at the symposium... Mrs. Delphi... Ursula... my friend... I can’t protect you. So, I’ll ask you one last time: Is there anything you know that will help me clear your name?”

There was a silence that lingered long enough for the sound of a *cawing* bird to come echoing off the buildings.

“I’ve told you everything,” Dr. Delphi said.

“Then, I’ll see you at the symposium.”

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A boot scraped as Teddy turned in place.

Hide.

I ducked deeper into a shadow as Teddy passed by with a hand to his cheek. Absorbed with his wound, he didn't notice me. Dr. Delphi was close behind him sniffing, too buried in her suppressed emotions to look in my direction. Soon, they were both out of sight, trudging off in different directions. It wasn't until silence permeated every inch of the still air that I stepped back out to touch the light.

I get the feeling that those weren't the people you were looking for.

"Yeah," I said, trying to gain my bearings after following Lucy's random directions. "I was looking for a couple named Samson and Phoebe."

The voice laughed, and I flinched at the volume. ***Yeah, that makes more sense. I can hear them now. I'll take you to them. Go straight toward the billboard and take the sidewalk out of the city.***

I took off with a heavy mind. On one hand, I was thankful to know all this new information, but... it was a lot. And I'd signed a contract. Was I going to fight a war? Was I going to die here?

Left... right... straight...

For thirty minutes, I followed Lucy's words and found my friends in the middle of an empty patch of grass. There were several small structures around them, mostly composed of sticks and bricks. At the sight of me, Samson perked up while Phoebe squinted with suspicion.

"Hey, guys," I said. "Sorry I'm late."

"Hey, Phil." Samson stood to greet me, dispelling some tension I didn't realize I'd formed when I first saw him.

"Hey." Phoebe looked at me like I was a ghost.

I looked back with equal suspicion. "What?"

"How did you find us?"

Don't tell them about me.

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I don't know why I was listening to him, but I did. "You guys left a trail," I lied. "Sorry I'm late."

"No, we're glad you made it," Phoebe said, not bothering to investigate further. I made a note to follow up with Lucy about his secrecy later.

"So, what are you working on?"

They both shrugged.

"Nothing, really," Samson said. "I've been refining my bricks, and Phoebe's—"

"I'm making mortar," Phoebe said proudly. "Everyone's working on bricks, but we still have to bind them together. If I get ahead of that, then we get ahead of everyone."

"That's smart."

"We were thinking about building a house for our project," Samson said, "but I overheard another group thinking about the same thing. So now I'm hoping we can come up with something original."

"For what it's worth," Phoebe started, "I think we should stick to a brick-and-mortar structure. Our build doesn't have to be fancy; it just has to get a good grade."

"Maybe we can build an underground hideout," I suggested. It would be nice to know how to make one of these in case war actually *did* break out.

"Like the Situation Room?" Samson glanced at Phoebe. "I dig it. We can have secret meetings and stuff. That sounds awesome."

Phoebe shrugged indifferently. "Sure. I just want to get started. Time is grades."

I breathed a sigh of relief, happy they liked my idea. "So, how do we want to do this?"

"Well," Samson began, "Phoebe's got a lock on the mortar. If you can make bricks, I'll dig our hole. I'm not sure it's possible to move sand with our minds—"

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“It is,” Phoebe said. “But don’t ask how I know. I can’t even remember.”

“Well, even so, we don’t know how to do it,” Samson said. “So, the hole will need to be manually dug. Once we have that, it’s just a matter of following a blueprint.”

My mind steeled itself at his suggestion. Making one brick was hard enough, but now I was going to have to make hundreds. Thousands. It was going to take a lot of work.

I smiled. For once, I was looking forward to it.

Chapter 28

Building Small Successes

THE NEXT AFTERNOON, I met with Samson and Phoebe in the classroom, and we hashed out a complete construction plan. Phoebe found a few structural diagrams from the internet, Samson calculated the dimensions ours would need to be, and I added little details here and there. Then, we started the real work.

Knowing we weren't strong enough to create the entire underground bunker at once, we divided the work into sections and chipped away at our goal. Each day, Phoebe and I created nothing but bricks and mortar and hoarded these supplies off to the side of Samson's ever-enlarging hole.

Early on, each brick took a heavy toll on my body, and I felt like I was falling off a bike over and over again. But on each cycle, I recovered a little faster and became a little more efficient. As the days passed, I grew better and better at creation, and it wasn't long before I was able to make ten bricks at once, then twelve.

By the fifth day, Phoebe and I had finished creating materials and Samson was teaching us how to make shovels. They were simple creations requiring only a wooden stick and a metal spade, but it was invigorating to have something new in my skill set. I learned how to make it faster than Phoebe, and Samson had to literally hold her hands as she learned to withstand the extra drain that came with multi-part creations.

Suddenly, in the face of these small successes, I yearned to learn more. Plans started forming in my mind. I could check out library books to get new ideas, run experiments to create new things, and ask people in Mandala to teach me directly. I'd never had thoughts like these, but in the process of

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creating my first real structure, I felt—for the first time in my life—that Anberlin might be right. Maybe I had potential.

By the seventh day, the hole was completed, and we started laying bricks. Beginning at the corners, we formed an assembly line where Samson shuffled bricks toward Phoebe who would rub mortar around the edges. Then she would hand me the brick, and I'd place it. Though the work was repetitive, it was made interesting by small talk with Lucy.

So, what did you do before Mandala?

"I worked security," I whispered, safe from the ears of my friends.

Does your family know what you do now?

"They're not around. My father's dead. My mother's gone. My Grandpa's alive, but I don't see him often."

Really? I miss my family. If I could, I'd visit every day. Is there a reason you don't see your grandpa?

"He's in hiding," I said. "I wouldn't know where to find him."

Oh. I see.

"Sometimes I see him in my dreams, but not often. I'm hoping I won't have to seek him out after the Symposium. He's supposed to be there, and maybe then he'll come out of hiding."

Oh. That would be cool.

And inevitably, our conversation would be cut short by the presence of one of my friends or Lucy would get distracted, and we'd drift off to silence for hours.

The next few days were hectic. Every morning, I'd wake up refreshed, and every evening, I'd drag myself back to the Exit Pad with blistered hands. The strange thing, though, was that I was happy. The work left me fulfilled, and it was odd to find pleasure in the pain.

Our meetings started getting longer, and soon, we were working thirteen-hour days. By this point, I realized that sleeping in Lucy wasn't quite the same

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as sleeping in my room. Because this dream went on forever, my brain never got a chance to recharge, and as a result, I woke from each session craving more sleep. *Real* sleep. But once on break and in my bed, I never seemed able to fall asleep again.

The worst part of this insomnia was that I never got to see Aurora. I'd grown accustomed to seeing her in my dreams once or twice a week, and I was coming to terms with the fact that I wouldn't see her at all during our construction period.

On the bright side, though, I was spending a lot of time with Samson and Phoebe. They would wait for me together at the elevator in the mornings, and we'd go down to Lucy as a group. All this work made it feel like my blunder with Phoebe was *months* ago, not days. Because of this, Samson and I had completely returned to normal speaking terms, and I no longer wondered if he was going to hold a grudge. The answer was clear: he wasn't.

As an added benefit, being around Samson and Phoebe so much allowed me to appreciate what their relationship was becoming. Since actively putting aside my jealousy, I took delight in the way they looked at one another, held hands, and shared compliments. They were natural together, which highlighted how much I had been trying to force things.

By Thursday evening, the day before the symposium, we were standing in the confines of our completed underground bunker. Phoebe closed the hatch behind us and slid open a small window for light. Even from the shadows, Samson's eyes shone brilliantly as he admired our handiwork.

"This is awesome," Samson said, patting the brick walls to test their integrity. "We can meet here all the time, and nobody will ever know."

Well done. Your room turned out great.

"I mean, we'll have to show it to Anberlin and the rest of the class," Phoebe said, propping the hatch back open. "So, it won't be a secret for long."

"I guess you're right," Samson said, following Phoebe up the wooden

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ladder and out of the space. “But still, it’s a cool clubhouse.”

“What now?” I asked, pulling myself to solid ground.

“Now,” Samson said, “we go get some sleep. I’m tired.”

“Whoa, someone write down the date and time,” Phoebe said, smiling.

“Samson admitting exhaustion?”

“I was just being humble,” Samson said, firing back. “You know, for your sake.”

“Of course you were,” Phoebe said. “So, I take it you want to spend the next few hours polishing the hatch?”

Samson smiled, his bluff called. “No, I concede. I’m exhausted.”

“Thank goodness,” Phoebe said, with an exaggerated eye roll. “Let’s head back.”

We took off together toward the Exit Pad with our chins held high. Far in the distance, we could see the towering walls that shielded the Symposium Hall from outside eyes. It was out in the desert, a box sitting in a sea of sand. A tiny silhouette was walking along scaffolding at the very top, and I swore it was the outline of Anberlin.

“What do you think they’re building?” I asked Samson.

He looked at me with a wide smile. “I don’t know, but however grand you think it’ll be, it’ll be twice that.”

We entered the city, finding it bustling with activity. It was far busier than normal. A man in a turban nearly bumped into us, and we had to dodge around a woman carrying an umbrella. I didn’t recognize any of them. Still, the city was large, and we cut through it with ease to the Exit Pad. A long line had formed outside the dome, and we joined it at the back.

Naturally, all our eyes were glued to the box in the desert. A loud rumbling echoed, followed by the whine of an angle grinder. People moved up and down the scaffolding quickly, each one taking a hard look over the building.

“Look, it’s my dad!” Samson pointed to a large silhouette standing atop

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the structure. “I can’t wait for the symposium to end. He’s been so busy getting ready for it, I haven’t seen him at all since class started.”

“Wait, not even once?” Phoebe asked.

Samson shook his head. “Nope.”

“I couldn’t imagine,” Phoebe said. “I call home almost every day.”

“Every day?” Samson widened his eyes incredulously. “What could you possibly talk to your family about every day?”

“Well, my youngest sister Katelyn is trying out for the Junior Nationals swim team, so I talk about practices. And I’ve been tutoring my other sister Sophie on the side. She’s a precognitor too, so I want her to know everything I learn.” As Phoebe spoke, it was clear how proud she was of her family.

I wished I still had mine.



Once in Mandala, we said our goodbyes and headed back to our respective rooms. I shuffled slowly, needing restful sleep. As I walked, I stumbled upon Teddy and Anberlin arguing about transporting a research project from Level Four to Level One. By their posture, it seemed serious, so I shuffled past without a word.

Once in my room, I collapsed into bed. It held the comfort of coming home from a long bout of travel. Between the folds of the sheets, my brain raced with new thoughts, and I hoped I’d see Aurora tonight. It’d been more than two weeks without her in my dreams, and I felt I’d never changed more in such a small amount of time. I wanted to show her my new construction skills and share with her what happened with Samson and Phoebe.

I tossed and turned, but rather than being caught up in doubts and regrets, I was brimming with pride. The Secret Room had been a difficult project. In

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fact, it might've been the first thing I'd ever seen through from start to finish. It was invigorating—and that was a problem now that I was trying to fall asleep.

Desperate, I closed my eyes and counted breaths, meditating beneath a warm blanket.

Breathe in... Breathe out...

I never found the peace that came with meditation, but I *did* find some room to sleep.

Chapter 29

Once Upon a Dream

BEFORE ME STOOD A gargantuan tree. It was taller and wider than anything I'd ever seen before. In fact, it dwarfed me in size by such a large factor that I didn't even realize it was a tree at first; I thought it was just a wall of bark.

I backed away to get a better view, finding the tree had a few peculiar features. For one, a round door had been carved into the center of the trunk, suggesting it was a sort of building. For another, there was a lantern nailed beside the door with a star-like object that flickered like a flame. Last, against the darkness of the night sky, I couldn't tell how high the tree went.

Looking at it all, I wondered whether the tree was hollow, or if the door was a decorative facade. I took a few steps forward and reached for the handle, but as my hand hovered over the knob, I heard a rustling from inside. So, I had one answer: it was hollow. But this created a new question: who was inside?

My hand closed into a fist, and I knocked, rapping once, twice, thrice. Whoever was inside stopped moving. There was a dash of silence. I knocked again and heard footsteps growing louder. Slowly, the stranger's shadow filled the gap at the floor, until—

“Phillip!”

I perked up. “Aurora!”

“What are you doing here?” Her expression shifted from caution to delight. “It doesn't matter. Come on in!”

I stepped into the foyer and looked around the circular room. The tree trunk had been carved away to be hollow, leaving only a giant spiral staircase

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to line the walls. There was no furniture, save for a stunning chandelier bearing sparkling ethereal lights. But even for as vacant as the tree was, the room held a magical aura, as though it had been crafted from a spell.

“So, what’s this room going to become?” I asked. My voice echoed off the amphitheater-like walls with a musical quality that made both of us share a look of surprise.

“I’m not sure yet,” Aurora said.

“Maybe I can help build it up.”

Aurora stopped and gave me a knowing look. “No way.” She took a step closer. “You learned how to create?”

“I did,” I said. “Made a whole building already. So, we just need a plan and I can create with you.”

“Right.” She retreated into her mind to think. “It’s a delicate thing.”

“Just say the first thing that comes to mind,” I said, echoing the words she’d once spoken to me with a devilish smirk. “Anything at all.”

Aurora smiled and took a slow look around the room, taking in every detail of the circular foyer until she’d spun in a complete circle. Facing me again, her eyes twinkled with a kind of mischief that outclassed me.

“You know—” she said, her voice filled with playful venom, “—I was just thinking about how much this place would make a killer dance hall.”

I blushed, remembering how we talked about high school dances all those months ago. She was going to rope me into it, wasn’t she?

Sure enough, her clothes rippled. A second ago, she’d been wearing jeans and a t-shirt, but now, she wore a dazzling ball gown. Her golden hair was done up, capped by a tiara, and her nails were vibrantly pink, matching her dress. She took a step forward, and the fabric of her dress rippled like the surface of a pond. I looked over her with wonderment, as though she’d stepped out of a storybook.

With a flick of her wrist, a perfectly tailored suit wrapped around my own

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clothes. A tight vest clung to my chest, and a short-stemmed rose was pinned to the front of my jacket. Aurora stepped toward me, and I shuffled in place, steadying myself. Her hands lifted to my chest, and she tightened the knot on my tie.

“Phillip—” Aurora was inches from my face, “—will you be my date to homecoming?”

My cheeks flushed red, and I lowered my gaze. My brain was somehow too small to contain all the thoughts I had, and yet I thought them all anyway. After a moment, I smiled and met her gaze.

“Yeah,” I whispered.

In response to my word, a dozen instruments appeared in the corner and sighed with that ineffable quality that made music feel like it was a living, breathing thing. Then, they sprang into a melody, moving all on their own. Without people guiding the instruments, the scene took a moment to adjust to, but Aurora grabbed my hand and a sense of reassurance swept through me.

Their music filled the room, and I was swept away into a dance. I’d never danced before, but the way Aurora moved made it seem easy. She guided me around the room, driving me forward and backward across the wood-grain floor while our bodies matched the rhythm of the music. There was no sense in counting seconds or minutes; time here was both eternal and fleeting. We weren’t dancing to get to the end of the song; we were dancing to be one with it.

We moved until the music escalated to signal it was coming to an end. In time with the final note, Aurora lifted my hand, spun beneath the arc, and dipped beneath my grip. My support on her was awkward and unstable, but Aurora—with her infinite magic—bent physics to make herself weightless. There, in the crook of my arm, she floated slightly above the ground. Our eyes interlocked, and a soft vibration rumbled through my soul.

I should kiss her.

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I paused.

No. Not after what happened last time I kissed someone.

The final note dissipated, and the strings warmed into something slower and smoother. Aurora pulled herself out of the dip and moved my hands to her waist. With a gentle tug, she pulled me close.

“Relax,” she said, feeling the tension building inside me. “We’re here as friends. Let yourself go.”

Something in me softened, and together, we swayed. For the first minute of this new song, I thought about each step with great intensity, but as Aurora nestled her head in the crook of my shoulder, I started moving without thinking. It was bliss having no noise rustling around my mind. The only thing I could equate it to was that one microsecond of meditation where everything had come together. The one brief moment of reprieve I’d felt in my tumultuous life. And just like that moment, I had to ruin it by thinking.

She’s not real. You can’t fall for a girl who’s not real, idiot.

Without warning, I pulled away.

“What’s wrong?” Aurora asked, surprised by the change in my energy.

“Uh...” I squirmed a bit. “It’s hot in here, don’t you think?”

Aurora frowned and thought hard about her next word.

“Yeah,” Aurora said finally. “There’s a doorway halfway up the staircase that leads to a branch with a brilliant view. Would you like to get some fresh air?”

“Yes,” I said, desperate for anything to pull me away from my feelings.

With this, Aurora gripped my hand and led the way up the stairs. I trailed behind her, my insides twisting and knotting. Overthinking was one thing, but this was so much more. Somehow, I found a way to make a perfect moment unbearable, and it left me deflated.

We circled round the spiral staircase until my legs burned, and then we went even farther beyond. Eventually, we reached a small gap in the tree’s wall.

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Aurora let go of my hand to squeeze through, stepping gingerly onto a thick tree branch.

I peered between the gap and froze. The branch extended for a few dozen feet and tapered off to twigs. This was scary enough, but as Aurora took light and even steps out onto the branch, it bobbed up and down, threatening to crack. Worse, she went so far down the branch that I could barely see her in the dark of night.

Going after her wasn't safe, but that was where Aurora was, so it was where I wanted to be, too. It took a moment for me to build up my courage, but eventually, I shuffled onto the open branch one baby-step at a time, making constant adjustments for the light breeze that may or may not have been real. After an eternity, I'd reached Aurora and sat beside her. She seemed oblivious to the way my heart pounded audibly through my chest, and I was thankful for her inattention.

Aurora plucked a colossal leaf from its stem and absentmindedly tore pieces of it away. With each fragment torn, she'd toss it over the side and watch as it fluttered to the ground. I reached for a leaf myself and tried to pry it from its stem, but it wouldn't break free. After a few pulls, I gave up and stared vacantly at the night sky.

We sat together with only the gentle hum of nature breaking the silence. As I absorbed the atmosphere of the world, I felt a complicated mix of energy and a swell of new emotions. It was the most discontent I'd ever felt in a state of peace.

"Aurora?" I said softly. She turned her whole body to look at me, and my heart melted. "Thanks for being my date to homecoming. I had a wonderful time."

"I had a good time, too."

There was a long, happy pause.

"Say, how are things with your friend and her boyfriend?" Aurora asked.

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Her voice was delicate, allowing me space to distance myself from the question if I wanted to.

“Oh, I can’t believe I forgot to tell you. They forgave me. In fact, we’ve been spending the last couple of weeks working together on a project. It’s been nice.”

“You have good friends.”

“I do.”

I stared longingly at Aurora and debated whether to count her as a friend, too. On one hand, she was extremely intelligent and supportive, but on the other, I would never know if she was—

“You okay?” Aurora asked.

“Huh? Yeah. I just—” I cleared my throat. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Uhm... Are you real?”

“Like, *real* real?” Aurora cocked her head. “Like, alive with a body and stuff?”

“I don’t know what it means to be alive anymore. Just... real. Are you real?”

“I... sort of, yes. I think.”

“Huh?”

Aurora gazed up at the stars and took a deep, filling breath. “Have you ever heard the term Cogito, Ergo Sum?”

I shook my head.

“It’s a saying by a philosopher trying to derive the basis for reality. When asked how we could know with certainty that we weren’t all just dreaming of fake reality, he answered with Cogito, Ergo Sum. It means, ‘I think, therefore I am.’”

“I’ve heard that one before,” I said. “But I don’t understand it.”

The wind stirred, and Aurora held her hand against the night sky. She

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squinted, and with a subtle motion, she closed her fingers around a star. When she opened her fist again, brilliant god rays shone from her fingers to her face.

“What it means,” she continued, her eyes reflecting the star’s glitter, “is that as long as I have thoughts—any thoughts—then I’m *real* in some sense of the word. I might be a ghost, or an imaginary fragment, or entirely in your head, but as long as my thoughts are my own, then *I’m* real, even if the world around me is not.”

Aurora opened her hand all the way, exposing the blinding light to the world. Then, she blew the stardust away like the frills of a dandelion.

I looked over her carefully, admiring the way she thought about things. There was no doubt about it anymore. Real or not, I liked her.

So, what next? I asked myself. I wanted to be kind and direct, but as I opened my mouth to do so, I stopped. I didn’t want to be the guy who liked a girl who didn’t exist. I wanted to be with someone who’s *really* real, in an alive-with-a-body kind of way.

What’s next is you forget about it, I decided. This answer didn’t sit well, however.

“Hey,” Aurora started softly, “I was hoping you’d be willing to jump back down to the ground with me. Are you still afraid of heights?”

“You mean, have I gotten over my greatest fear in the last two weeks?” I chuckled and shook my head. “I’ve changed a lot, but no. Not that. Why do you always want me to jump, anyway?”

Aurora smiled the way sunlight shines on a flower. “I enjoy watching you consider it.”

“Really?”

“Really. You’re different from so many people. You think about your fears, and I never know what you’ll do with them. That’s exciting. If you change your mind, let me know.”

Aurora’s offer rolled around in my mind, and I tried to imagine myself

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jumping, but a leap here and now would require a level of faith I didn't have yet. But maybe I was ready for something else.

"Instead of jumping, can we glide up a little?" I asked. "Like what you were trying to do the first time you showed me how to fly?"

"That's exactly what I was talking about," Aurora said, holding out her hand. "You don't believe it yet, but you're a bit of a wildcard." She gave me a look—a final opportunity to step away—but I took her hand and pulled her close, shocking us both.

Suddenly, the air stilled around us, and a bubble of wind closed around my body. Gravity released, and the hair on my arms stood on end. My feet left the branch, and I gripped Aurora so tightly that I feared I might crush her.

Aurora didn't mind, though. She smiled wider as we lifted higher. Gently, we swayed, dodging the leaves and branches that intercepted our path. The motion was as natural as the slow dancing we did in the dance hall, and my grip relaxed.

"Look," Aurora said, pointing down.

My gaze followed her gesture, and after a moment of adrenaline, I saw what she did. From above, the tree shimmered with indescribable magnificence. The stardust Aurora had blown away had tangled itself in the leaves, and the tiny starlight lantern that hung outside the front door radiated through the branches. The whole tree was outlined in starlight, a stunning silhouette.

Slowly, my eyes moved back, and I stared into Aurora's eyes. An electric spark fluttered through my heart again, and I decided I was going to do something crazy. Something crazier than enrolling at Mandala. Something crazier than stealing a file from the library. Something crazier than floating off a giant tree with Aurora.

I was going to let myself fall for her.

"Aurora... I... I—I..."

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I closed my eyes to build up courage and reached deep inside to find my voice. A hurricane of thoughts ripped apart my courage and spewed doubt around my mind like debris. Right at the edge of sharing the contents of my heart, I retreated into who I'd always been—and I left the statement unfinished.

I opened my eyes, expecting to see Aurora waiting for my next word, but...

Chapter 30

Astral Projection

BUT AURORA WASN'T THERE. Gone was the tree, the wind, and the horizon; it was now just a blank wall, cold air, and a heavy blanket. The dream had ended.

I lay in bed for several minutes and listened to my heartbeat. It was pumping so fast, but as I counted breaths, it settled to a comfortable rhythm.

"I like you," I said aloud to the ceiling. Was it really that hard? I could say the words all day to nobody and nothing at all. And yet, I couldn't do it to some imaginary girl in my mind. "I really like you," I said again, this time softer and more bitter.

If it wasn't the day of the symposium—the day I'd see Grandpa—I would've stayed in bed forever. But alas, it *was*, so I forced myself up and went through the motions of my morning routine. As I was brushing my teeth, a rapid knock sounded on my door, and Samson's impatient voice cut through the running water.

"Hey! Are you in there?!"

"Ye'h," I said, still brushing. "What'sh up?"

"I want to head to the symposium early. Can you hurry? We still have to pick up Phoebe."

I spat out my toothpaste and opened the door. Samson was standing in the doorway, his expression reminiscent of a six-year-old on the way to his own birthday party. I joined him in the hallway and closed the door. Then we took off for Phoebe's room.

"I'm so excited," Samson said, as though this were a confession and not something written all over his personhood. "After all this time, we're finally

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going to learn astral projection. I mean, what's next? Enhanced conduits? Do you think they're going to crack the Omega Project?"

"I don't know what any of that is."

"Me neither," Samson said. "It's just stuff my dad yaps about. But it's so cool. Thousands of years of coalescence, and we're just *now* figuring this stuff out. It's going to be amazing."

The halls of Mandala were even busier than last night. There were thousands of strangers roaming the halls, chatting and bustling about in anticipation of the event. Samson and I squeezed past them to get to the elevator, but after ten minutes of waiting, we gave up and took the stairs.

Phoebe's room wasn't far from the stairwell, and we were there in minutes. But something was amiss. A panicked voice sounded from inside the room.

"No!" Phoebe's voice boomed from inside. "No! No! No!"

Samson and I pushed forward and pressed against the door, but it was locked.

"Phoebe? Are you okay?" Samson asked.

There was no answer, but something in her room collapsed with a **THUMP**. Samson and I exchanged a serious glance.

"Step back," Samson ordered. With a heavy kick, he broke through Phoebe's lock and shoved the door open.

Her room was trashed. Dozens of shredded papers were strewn about. Her desk had been flipped over. Pens, notebooks, furniture, clothes, and toiletries were scattered around. And in the center of it all was Phoebe, red-eyed and weeping. She shot around to face Samson, fuming.

"Get out," she said through gritted teeth.

Samson stepped toward her. "Phoebe—"

"*Now.*"

"Phoebe, what's wrong?" I rushed into the room. "We're trying to—"

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Phoebe's eyes met mine, and her anger washed to sadness. Her eyes watered as she fumbled for words.

"What?" I asked.

"I'm sorry, Phillip," she said, brushing away a teardrop. "I'm so sorry..."

"What are you sorry about?"

"I—" she stopped talking, pushed past me, and scrambled out the door.

Samson and I remained in her room, dumbfounded.

"What was that about?" I asked.

"I don't know," Samson said dejectedly, moving to pick up Phoebe's toppled desk. "She gets like this sometimes. I mean, not *this* bad, but... emotional. About her dreams. She'll be okay."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm positive," Samson said, gathering trash and stacking it neatly in a corner. "The best thing we can do is wait for her to get composed. Come on. Let's go to the symposium without her. If she gets herself together, she'll join us. If not, I'll see her afterward."

We left the room, and Samson tried to close Phoebe's door, but the lock was broken from our entrance. He tried several times to get the handle to latch properly, but it was no use. With a curse, Samson slapped the handle and promised he'd fix it later.

We continued our journey to the symposium in awkward silence, both wanting to talk about what had happened, but neither of us wanting to speak first. I tried to find words every minute or two, but it was just too strange. Did she really have a dream? And what did I have to do about it? Why was she sorry? I knew Samson wouldn't have answers, and if it were any other day, I'd chase after Phoebe and find out what was coming. But it *wasn't* any other day, and I needed to be at the symposium to see Grandpa.

We waited nearly thirty minutes to catch the next ride to Lucy. It was a tight squeeze in the elevator, and I stood shoulder-to-shoulder with a dozen

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strangers. Down we went until Level Two came into view.

I was blown away. I knew the research symposium was a big deal, but I had no idea how big a deal it really was. Typically, Level Two would have been empty this time of day, but now, it was packed to the brim. Every bed looked to be taken.

As I crossed the room, I listened to the people around me. They marveled over Lucy's brain, and I heard them mutter about the rarity of his existence. I smiled, realizing the things I now found normal were odd to them. And as I reveled in their fascination, I understood on a deeper level why Lucy preferred to keep his existence a secret. If everyone spoke to him at once, he'd go crazy.

"My dad saved me a bed," Samson said, veering off toward the back of the room. "I'll catch up with you later, alright?"

"Okay," I said, my eyes catching sight of an open bed in the opposite direction. "See you later."

With that, we separated, and I hurried to claim the bed I'd seen. After locking eyes with a British chap, we both quickened our pace to the mattress. With haste, I put my hand on the covers first, and after a curt 'bloody hell', the man moved on. I jumped in and pulled the covers to my neck.



I snapped lucid at the center of a large crowd in Lucy. There, a man stood on top of a platform, directing the mass toward the symposium hall. I looked around for Samson, but amid the sea of people, he was impossible to find. To make matters worse, the crowd was growing, and the people behind me had begun to push, so I followed the herd.

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“The conference will start in thirty minutes,” an usher shouted. “Come along now. The presentation is this way.”

The crowd meandered toward the desert, and I was excited to find out what Teddy and Anberlin had built. As I rounded the road near the edge of the city, the answer became apparent.

In front of me was an enormous pyramid, split into three pieces: a golden base, a crystal middle, and a golden ceiling. It was a masterwork of architecture. Truly something that could’ve only been built in Lucity.

But also, it was unsettling. The clear panes created the illusion of a magically suspended ceiling, supported only by thin strips of steel running along the corners. This didn’t feel like a stable structure; it felt as though the ceiling would come crashing down at any moment. But it had to be safe, because Anberlin and Teddy made it.

As the crowd pushed forward, I found the pyramid surrounded by a large moat, with the only entrance being a wooden drawbridge held up by taut chains the size of my arm. The *clunk-clunk* of boots as we crossed was calming, almost like the *pitter-patter* of rain on a rooftop, and after being rounded up like cattle, I was finally inside.

If the exterior was meant to be as impressive as possible, then the interior was designed to be as beautiful as it could be. Lining the walls were sculptures of Greek gods, famous works of art, architectural blueprints, and more, and more, and more. I spent ten minutes walking the exhibits, and I could’ve gone an hour more if an usher hadn’t urged us to find our seats. Alone, I found an empty chair and sank into it.

As I waited for the symposium to start, I scanned the audience in search of Grandpa. Supposedly, he was hidden to the point that nobody would recognize him, and that made everyone a suspect. Maybe it was the guy in the front with a face tattoo. Maybe it was the guy in the back wearing a hoodie. Maybe he wasn’t here and was watching through a camera feed. I scoured as

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many faces as I could and gained no leads.

As Teddy stepped out on stage, I sat back in my chair, trusting Grandpa would find me on his own eventually.

“Attention, everyone,” Teddy said, his voice projecting around the building. “Welcome to the Third Annual World Research Symposium for Coalescence Science.”

Teddy waited until the arena quieted before continuing.

“First and foremost, thank you all for coming. Today’s symposium demonstration will be quick, but its contents will revolutionize our work for decades to come. Let’s jump in.”

Teddy pressed a button on his remote, and the projector screen flickered on to the first slide. It was a picture of a bed with a body lying in it and a circle around the bed.

“As we all know, the alpha waves of coalescents travel outward from our bodies in the shape of a sphere.” Teddy used a laser pointer to outline the circle in the image. “This has presented a challenge for coalescents—one of proximity. That is to say, if a coalescent isn’t in range of their target, a dream will not be shared.”

Teddy clicked a button, and the second slide flickered up onto the wall. This picture contained the first bed with the alpha sphere displayed as a circle, and a second bed slightly outside the confines of the circle.

“Because of this limitation,” Teddy continued, “our agents have had to endure the highest magnitudes of danger to share dreams with our enemies. We’re forced to rent hotel rooms near mafia pens, sleep in vans outside apartment buildings, and nap an arm’s length from murderous terrorists. But our recent discovery is about to make our world much, much safer. I am, of course, speaking of astral projection.”

Teddy clicked the button, and the alpha sphere unraveled, peeling away until it was a straight line that overlapped both people on the screen.

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“Astral projection will allow us to focus our alpha energy into a consciously driven package of energy which we can direct however we’d like. It will allow us to bypass the alpha sphere and target individuals a *safe* distance away.”

There was a buzz of excitement around the room. Hushed murmurs soon became a gentle roar, and then thunderous applause. Teddy reveled in the praise before doing his best to corral the audience’s attention back to him.

“Now, some of you may be asking, where’s the proof?” he continued. “Where’s the proof that we’ve uncovered a reliable and consistent way to project our alpha spirits? Well, it would be prudent to note that not a single one of you has seen me at Level Two today. That’s because I’m attending this conference from my office on Level One.”

The arena applauded, but somewhere in the crowd, I heard some rumblings of dissent. Something that held more reservation than anything.

“What about Anberlin?” Teddy asked, raising his voice. “Did anyone see him enter the room today? Of course not, because Anberlin is joining us from Level Four.”

The crowd broke out into another bout of applause, but this one was not as exuberant.

“And we have one more surprise,” Teddy said. “This one is exceptionally interesting. Miss Baxter, where are you?”

A lady in the front row stood up.

“Miss Baxter is a precognitor,” Teddy said. “It shouldn’t be possible for her to share dreams, and yet, by using the technique we uncovered, she joins us all the way from the parking lot. That’s right—this tool is so powerful that it can reach people over a mile away, and it’s so versatile that even your precognitors can join the fight!”

The crowd talked amongst themselves again, but now, the sentiment was shifting. No longer were the people celebrating the research—they were

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questioning the implications of this development. I tried to listen in on a nearby group as they broke into an argument, but it was impossible to follow.

“To be clear,” Teddy started, adjusting to the crowd as they turned against him. “This is a *very* difficult technique to master. Anberlin and Mr. Logan have been working non-stop to create a curriculum for others to learn. So, there should be little concern about its misuse.”

The last sentence was barely audible over the crowd’s sudden bickering.

“Mr. Logan,” Teddy said, elevating his voice. “Will you please approach the stage to answer questions?”

Samson’s father stood from a seat in the front row and stepped on the raised platform. He was a large, muscular man with a frame equal to his son’s, if not larger. From the front row, Samson peered up at him with immeasurable pride. Their features were almost identical, from the shade of their dark skin to the arc of their smile to the intangible confidence in their posture.

“Mr. Logan has spearheaded this project and will answer your questions,” Teddy said, nearly shouting. “If you have a concern, please raise your hand and we’ll work through your inquiries as quickly as possible.”

As he spoke, the crowd grew rambunctious, with some people standing and others arguing with their neighbors.

“How do we keep the enemy from using this on us?” one guest shouted over the racket.

“Deuterium,” Mr. Logan answered, his voice a deep bass. “We’ve been using deuterium around our dormitories for years with a one hundred percent success rate in blocking alpha waves. Renovations have already begun for Mandala, and we’re working with contractors to secure more for everyone.”

“But deuterium is expensive,” another guest shouted, standing up in the middle of the room. “Not everyone here has a fancy government stipend. What are we expected to do about—”

Phillip.

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I stirred in my seat.

Phillip, get out of there.

A thunderous echo sounded outside the hall. I looked up at Teddy, but his wide-eyed appearance did little to comfort me. He gestured a signal toward Anberlin, who took off to coordinate with security.

You need to leave.

Someone else in the audience stood up. “How long do we have before enemy terrorist groups gain access to this?” they shouted. “Between the Night Corps, Al Halum, and the Oneiroi, do you think anyone else has discovered the secret?”

Phillip, listen to me. Stand up. Leave. They’re coming.

“Who?” I whispered.

“It has taken our best scientists many years to figure out how it works,” Teddy said, still trying to quell the agitated crowd, “so I don’t think just any small-time operation could figure it out. Not without our resources.”

There was another echo, this one louder and closer. It reminded me of a tree falling in the woods.

How do I know what that sounds like?

“Shit.”

Night Corps, Lucy said. ***They’re here.***

Chapter 31

Closing Remarks

WORDS CAUGHT IN MY throat. I wanted to shout at Teddy or Anberlin, but what if it wasn't true? What if Night Corps wasn't here? What if Lucy was just a figment of my imagination?

Instead of causing a disturbance, I stood amid the emerging chaos and crept through the shadows of commotion. My eyes stayed low as I moved out of my row and paraded down the center aisle, past hundreds of people too entrenched in their own conversations to take note of the rumbling growing closer. One step after another, I strode to the back of the room, ignoring the crowd that was starting to fill the aisles.

Once outside, I took a lonely *pit-pat* across the drawbridge. Behind me, Teddy stepped off stage to host a private conversation with Anberlin. They had a sharp exchange before Teddy returned to the microphone and announced plans to end the symposium.

The tightness in my chest unwound, and as the eventgoers stirred from their seats, I drew a deep, healing breath. As the first across the drawbridge, I looked around, finding the world empty save for a pillar of smoke that rose from deep within the city.

“Alright, Lucy,” I whispered. “Where’s the Night Corps?”

There was no response.

“Hello? You there?”

Someone behind me screamed. I turned and peered inside the pyramid, finding several men holding rifles. The echo of gunshots filled the air, and a string of bullets ripped apart an innocent body right in front of me. The body disappeared, disintegrating into nothingness, and I choked realizing this was

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the first time I'd ever seen someone die.

The rain of bullets continued to pour from black clouds made of gunpowder, and they struck indiscriminately like heavy hail. Paintings tore, statues crumbled, and bodies disappeared. As I watched, it was hard to tell who was diving for cover and who was getting gunned down.

I froze, trying to decide whether to run in and help or stay outside and hide. Why was I like this? My decision came too late as the drawbridge sprang to life and lifted to seal me away from the crowd. The motor roared and the chains coiled until suddenly, I was locked away from the chaos. I thought I was safe.

I was wrong.

“Hello, Phillip.”

I recognized the cold voice behind me. I knew it well. I wished it belonged to anyone else, but it didn't. The voice was unmistakable. Horrific. Traumatic.

The voice belonged to Mal.

I turned to face her, holding my breath under the desert sun.

The *rat-a-tat-tat* of rifles echoed out of the chamber, and the desperate screams from within chilled my soul. Even as the people inside the hall were slaughtered, I knew I would've preferred to be locked in that room than out here with this monster. I tried to move, but adrenaline suffocated me. Now I understood why deer never ran from the middle of the road; the shock of something much bigger and stronger hurtling your way was such a helpless experience that you could only wonder what the point of running would be.

Mal twirled a clawed finger through a pigtail, flashing the dragon tattoo on her wrist with each rotation. By her expression alone, you might have guessed she was enjoying a symphony and not enduring a cacophony.

“So. How's your day been?” Mal asked, mocking the carefree nature of teenage gossip. It was an incredibly mundane question given the screams that polluted the air behind me. Her words iced my heart, and I was taken aback

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by her childlike demeanor. The tone of her voice was a stark contrast to what I knew she was capable of.

Run.

I marked an angle for retreat, but I must've flinched early, because Mal took a step forward, shaking her head and *tutting*. A new plan formulated in my head, and I realized that if she wanted me dead, I'd be dead already. She needed me for something—which meant I could fight. But what could I do against her?

Mal's radio sprang alive.

"The attendees are under control," the voice said. "Henry Wolfe is not among them."

"Are the charges in place?" Mal replied, her tone more adult-like and mission-focused.

"Affirmative."

"Great," Mal said.

She snapped her fingers. The chains to the drawbridge responded to her action, loosening completely and slamming to the ground behind me, expelling a spray of dirt. Instinctively, I ducked down, and the sound shattered the vision of a brick I'd been holding in my mind.

Off-guard, Mal shoved me back, tightening her fingers around my neck before I could hit the ground. Suddenly, I was suspended at an angle, staring at the sun with a hand around my throat and my heels sliding on sand as she dragged me back into the hall.

We entered the pyramid, and the drawbridge closed again behind us. Down the aisle we went, past those who were weeping, those who were bleeding, and those who were stoic in their acceptance of death. My vision remained fixed on Mal's dragon tattoo. The ink was moving, the dragon's tail wagging. And now, I knew exactly what it meant.

We reached the far end of the hall, and with an easy heft, Mal tossed my

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body on stage. I rag-dolled across it, tumbling to the back where a boot slammed down on my chest. Something cracked, and a hot flash spread through my body.

Desperately peering through my tears, I searched the hostages to find my friends. Samson was on his knees near the front of the group, staring at the ground. His father was kneeling in front of him, his impressive size acting as a shield. My eyes swept further, and I found Anberlin closer to the center of the crowd, a beacon of Zen amongst a world of chaos.

Mal's cold hand snapped around my neck once again, and she pulled me to my knees. Then, something hard pressed against my temple—a gun. Half an inch of trigger pull was all that stood between me and death.

“Good afternoon, everyone,” Mal said. “The Night Corps would like to extend a warm welcome to everyone in attendance. I have but one matter of business, and that is to speak with Mr. Henry Wolfe. Would he care to step forward?”

I looked over the crowd expectantly, but no one stood.

“Anybody?”

Nobody.

Mal lifted the gun from my head, spun it around, and smashed my face in. I collapsed, feeling the sharp pain of metal tear away my skin. Mal hit me again and again, shattering the bones in my cheek and fingers as I held my hands between us. The crowd tensed as they watched, but nobody took a stand. By the time Mal had finished, I was scarcely recognizable, a mess of blood.

“Mr. Wolfe, won't you think of the children? Won't you think of *your* grandchild? Your little, it'sy-bitsy, pitifully weak, disgrace of a bloodline needs your help.”

I was suddenly angry. *He's supposed to be here, isn't he? Why won't he help me?*

“If Henry won't come out on his own, then maybe someone would like to turn him in.” Mal turned to address the symposium guests. “Allow me to

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explain the trap you're lying under. There are strips of explosives lined around the glass panes of the pyramid. On my command, those charges go off and the panels disappear one by one. Once the glass is gone, the ceiling falls, and everyone dies, simple as that. I have only one demand, and that's for Henry Wolfe to step forward."

Mal pressed the barrel of her gun against my temple again and waited. When nothing happened, she unclipped her radio and pressed a button. A glass pane exploded, and sharp hail rained down on the symposium guests.

Samson's father leaned over his son in a desperate bid to protect him, and there, his dark skin tore to red ribbons. Anberlin simply lowered his chin and absorbed the blow with grace. Afterward, he looked back up, a fire in his eyes. Why wasn't he fighting? People were dying, and the time was now. But no. He remained calm. In fact, he closed his eyes, as though this was the time to meditate.

Everyone else exploded with panic, and as the tensions mounted, Night Corps agents in the back of the room fired suppressive shots above the hostages' heads. The intense fear eventually brought order back to the room, and a new silence emerged, interrupted only by sobs and groans.

On my face, tears mixed with blood, and I joined the crowd in their wallowing. With my nostrils blocked, I looked up at the roof to get a breath. There, I found the steel rod in one corner buckling against the weight of the golden ceiling.

But in the gap where the glass had shattered, a new person was looking in, silhouetted against the sun. I squinted to see who was standing there, but I couldn't tell. Was it Grandpa? No, it couldn't be. Whoever it was, they had a smaller frame.

Someone in the crowd stood. A bubble of hope welled in my chest, but it wasn't Grandpa. It was Teddy. His hands were in the air, and he rose with unsteady legs.

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“Henry’s not here!” Teddy shouted.

“I have a good source that says he is,” Mal responded. “I admire your resistance, but I’m tired of your games, you liar.”

“I swear, he’s not here.”

“If that’s true, then I have pity for you all, as you’re all going to die.”

She hit a button on her radio again, and the second pane of glass shattered. I watched in what felt like slow motion as sharp fragments washed over the huddled masses, ripping into their skin. Someone disappeared, and I realized with horror that I’d never see them again. They were dead. In seconds, the grout in the floor tiling filled with blood. Only a minute later and the tiling too was an even coat of crimson.

Safe on the stage, I looked up at the steel beams to check if the ceiling would hold. The corners strained to support the top of the pyramid but settled into a structurally sound position. But while I was looking, I noticed the stranger had moved. They were standing on the third pane of glass, aiming a gun at someone farther down the pyramid

“People are going to *die*, Henry,” Mal said, her attention firmly locked to the guests. “Your own grandson is going to die. Are you just going to let that happen?”

All at once, the crowd turned and shouted for Henry.

“Stand up, Henry.”

“Give it up, Henry.”

“Save us, Henry.”

Only Teddy refrained from calling out. It seemed he had been lying to Dr. Delphi after all. And if Night Corps was here looking for Grandpa, it meant only one thing for the precognition teacher. She was the traitor.

“Listen, Henry. There’s a fifty-fifty chance the roof comes down with the next explosion. These lives will be on your hands.”

To this, Anberlin reopened his eyes and shot his gaze toward the sky.

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There, he locked eyes with the stranger on the roof. The stranger was no longer fighting. Instead, they were standing at the edge of an open gap, looking back at Anberlin. Each exchanged a slow, deliberate nod, and I sensed mounting opposition.

Maybe I could buy them an opening. Now was the time.

I didn't know how to construct a gun, but I'd created a shovel before. And shovels were like large, unsharpened knives. I closed my eyes, imagining hard steel being poured into a mold and a wooden handle being fused to the blade. By this point, I'd felt so much pain that I didn't even notice the strain of creation. Softly, the knife fell into my broken fingers. I forced myself to clench down on the handle, gritting through a wave of pain. All that was left now was to find the courage to use it.

Mal reached for her radio, and I twisted and lunged to take her by surprise.

But I was too slow.

She ducked sideways and dodged with ease. Then, with incredible swiftness, she caught my wrist out of the air and bent it backwards. I felt a sharp pop as my wrist dislodged, and then a loud crack as my bone snapped in half. The knife *clanged* to the ground.

But in the middle of the struggle, Anberlin stood, swiped a gun from the air, and fired toward the stage. Mal dipped back and fumbled for her radio, sending a third pane of glass exploding over the crowd.

This time, the crystal shards sprayed the back of the room where the Night Corps guards were standing, giving the stranger enough time to leap in from the ceiling. They fell at a rapid pace, landing so hard that the ground cracked beneath their feet. Their garb was black, and their face was hidden behind a shawl.

In the middle of my hyperventilation, I breathed a sigh of relief.

This was the Briar. She was here to help.

With perfect aim, the Briar fired at Night Corps guards, striking their arms

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and legs with stunning precision—aiming to disarm them without killing.

Suddenly, pandemonium. Some people ran, others fought, and more ducked for cover. In seconds, the room had devolved into a riot. The color in Mal's face drained, and she pulled her gun away from my head.

"You're more useful to me alive," she said, lunging off stage and storming toward the exit. "Cower as usual and you'll probably live."

As Mal advanced toward the exit, she fired blindly at anyone in her way. At the doorway, Mal snapped, and the drawbridge slammed to the ground. She sprinted across it, and barely a step into safety, she pressed the last button on her radio. The last of her explosives detonated, and the final pane of glass shattered. A torrent of shards hurtled toward me, and I took cover against the back wall. My back took several piercings, but I absorbed the blow without suffering anything fatal.

When the downpour ended, I realized the worst of it hadn't even started. The deep groan of cracking steel filled the room as the support beams caved in. With a roar, the beams buckled, and the solid gold capstone roof cracked apart.

Fear emanated from the Briar. The color of her eyes transitioned from red to white, and her skin cracked with burning energy. But as her ultimate action mounted, time continued to tick, and the ceiling continued to collapse.

Chunks of golden blocks rained down on the assembly, and my eyes drew a line to where the bulk of it would land. There, right in the middle of the room, I found Samson and his father. And as the metal finally snapped in half, I realized it was too late. There was nowhere for them to run. They were going to die.

"No!"

I lunged forward as though I had any power to save them, but I didn't. My arm stretched out over the edge of the stage as the capstone fell atop them. Instinctively, Samson's father rolled over to protect his son—but it was like an

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ant trying to save his kin from an elephant.

At the very same moment, the Briar exploded with a surge of white energy that burst across the room and engulfed us all. The aura swept through me, and I felt a wave of electricity fry the tips of my hair. Static vibrations burned through my brain, and with a final pulse of energy...



I woke up. We all did.

Chapter 32

Fallout

LEVEL TWO HAD DEVOLVED into chaos. Dozens mourned over unmoving bodies. Hundreds scrambled to find their friends. Thousands sat stunned. I tried to remember the details of what had just happened, but it was all just a flash and a blur.

I didn't even use the Exit Pad, I thought. How did I wake up?

Suddenly, I remembered Samson's father. I sprang out of bed and called out, but my voice was lost in a sea of others who were searching for their loved ones.

At that moment, Teddy burst into the room and marched toward the center column. Everyone stopped and turned to him for guidance, hoping he had answers.

"Attention, please!" his voice boomed. "We will be evacuating this room and inspecting its residents as they leave. If you are alive and well, get off your beds and head to the elevator in groups of five. This will give us a clear assessment of who needs help."

There was a heavy pause. When Teddy spoke again, his voice was softer, yet somehow clearer.

"I swear that if anyone responsible for this attack is in this room, we will find you and we will kill you. Now, get your I.D.'s ready, and start moving."

The room reacted slowly. Nobody wanted to abandon their dead friends, so most of them stayed put. Anyone who wasn't mourning, however, obeyed, and the mood around the room shifted from anger to depression to something far sadder.

Teddy sped toward me, his face contorting with rage. I took a step

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backward as he towered over me, and I flinched as he stopped an arm's length away.

"If you know where Henry is, you need to let me know *now*."

"I... I don't know," I said, cracking at the seams.

"Do you have *any* details about the location of the Night Corps? Their plans? Their... *anything*?"

I couldn't stop shaking. "No."

Teddy sighed and pursed his lips. "I'm going to spend the rest of the day trying to figure out how to move forward, but tomorrow afternoon, you need to stop by my office so we can figure out how to get ahold of your grandfather. This is of the utmost importance. Do you understand?"

"Y-Yes."

The elevator opened, and Anberlin entered. Before he could get a word in edgewise, Teddy lifted a finger, then pointed it.

"You need to prep your trainees for sorting, Anberlin."

Anberlin paused, surprised by the order. "They're not ready."

"They have until tomorrow morning," Teddy said.

"But—"

"This is not up for discussion." Teddy stepped toward the elevator. "I don't have time for this. We can't let Ursula get away."

"She's gone," Anberlin said. "I just came from the library. She must've slipped out when the symposium started. Security is combing through tapes to find out which direction she went."

Teddy stormed away without another word, disappearing beyond the guards in a matter of seconds.

Anberlin faced me.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes," I said, not sure if I was lying or not.

"This isn't your fault," he said. "Don't let anyone convince you it was,

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okay?”

I stared at him blankly. Somehow, the thought that people would think this was my fault hadn't occurred to me. Would they really?

“Stay strong,” Anberlin said. “And I'm proud of your effort to stop Mal.”

With that, Anberlin left, trailing after Teddy. By now, half the guests had gone, so when I resumed my search for Samson, I found him quickly. He was on the far side of the building, hunched over the large body of his father. The large—unmoving—body of his father.

I approached slowly.

“Samson, are you okay?”

There was no answer. Samson stayed where he was, struggling not to cry.

“Samson?”

“He saved my life,” Samson said behind gritted teeth. “He pushed me away from the debris and got hit at the last second.”

I paused, not sure what to say. “Is he...”

“He's alive,” Samson said. “But he's comatose.”

Comatose. The word rang hollow through my bones. I wanted to tell him it would be okay. That life would go on. But I didn't say anything; I knew better. I knew that, until his father woke up, it never got better. And even then, it would never be the same.

Quietly, I placed my hand on Samson's shoulder, but he swatted it away. Urgently, he stood and turned toward me. I expected his eyes to be filled with grief, but they were filled with rage.

“This is *your* fault.”

“What?” The word barely left my mouth. I couldn't believe Anberlin's warning came true so fast—and from Samson of all people.

“They were after *your* grandfather.” Samson took an aggressive step forward. “You're the reason my dad is like this.”

“I don't—”

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Samson puffed up. He clenched his fists, digging his fingernails into his palm. “Where is he? Where’s your grandfather?!”

“I don’t know!” I said, backing away.

Samson closed in on me, getting ready to strike. Then, unable to control himself, he unleashed his fury upon the nearest bed, wailing on it with his fists. The wood frame cracked and snapped under the strain. Nearby residents tried to stop him, but Samson was a freight train. He shoved them away, ripped apart a pillow with his fingertips, and destroyed a second bed with a kick. Nothing would calm him.

“Samson?” Phoebe had just made her way down the elevator.

Samson spun around to face her. Their eyes met, and his temper simmered. All at once, he fell apart. His shoulders slumped over, and he fell to the ground, weeping.

Phoebe rushed forward and placed her hand on Samson’s back. I stepped forward to assist her but stopped myself short. I couldn’t help but notice the way they avoided looking at me. How they angled their backs to me. They each had their reasons, but the intent was clear. Neither of them wanted me there.

And I wasn’t wanted there because...

This was all my fault.

I took a step backward, my retreat turning into a full-blown sprint. As my legs moved, I became increasingly aware of the stares. *Everyone* stared.

The guard could barely stop me as I flashed my badge and pushed into the elevator. There, in what should’ve been a cramped space, I stood in isolation. The moment the doors reopened, I took off for my room. Once inside, I paced between my bed and the door, wondering what to do next.

In desperation, I dug my phone out and pulled up Grandpa’s name. As I stared at his number, I filled with rage—the same kind that everyone else harbored toward me. This wasn’t my fault. This was *his*. He should’ve been there. He should’ve stopped this. He should’ve—

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'Grandpa, we need to meet. It's an emergency,' I texted him.

My eyes were glued to the phone as I waited for a reply.

'Okay,' he texted back. *'What's it about?'*

I didn't know what to say, so I just typed, *'Emergency.'*

'Give me an hour and I'll meet you in a dream.'

I destroyed a tub of melatonin, collapsed on my bed, and closed my eyes. Even with the help of the pills, it took the full hour for me to calm down enough to sleep.



I was standing at the edge of a farm. In the distance, a horde of locusts tore through an ocean of wheat, and as they swarmed, entire sections of field disappeared.

“Phillip?” the voice of Grandpa called out. “What’s the matter?”

I turned toward Grandpa and watched him hobble in my direction, working through an exaggerated limp. At the sight of him, my mind went ablaze, and a range of thoughts bombarded me. Grandpa noticed my intensity and slowed.

“Phil?”

A part of me wanted to ask about his limp, but my anger over the symposium took precedence. “Mandala was attacked today,” I said, forcing myself to remain steady. “By the Night Corps.”

Grandpa studied my face, my posture, and my tone. “And they were after...?”

“You.”

Grandpa swallowed hard, not surprised. In fact, it was clear he'd been

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expecting this day to come for a while now.

“Did anyone die?”

“Yes,” I said, squaring up to him. “Lots of people.”

Grandpa’s bottom lip quivered, caught somewhere between anger and grief.

“This is the second time they’ve attacked me to get to you,” I continued, making unwavering eye contact. “The first time, you promised I’d be safe at Mandala. Now, they’re here too. Why?”

Grandpa remained silent.

“*Tell me!* Everyone is blaming me, and it’s not fair. It’s not fair to me, or Samson, or any of the families mourning today. This is your fault—you know that, right? *Your* fault, not mine.”

Grandpa looked down. “You’re right.”

“So, do something,” I pressed, this time desperate. “Please.”

“It’s not that easy. Look, Phillip—” Grandpa looked away. In the distance, the locust horde was buzzing to a new mound, and a vulture circled over a pit of diseased cattle. This land was in ruin, a far cry from the last time we were together. “They’re after me because I woke from my coma, and they want to know how I did it.”

“So, tell them.”

“I can’t,” Grandpa said. “You don’t understand what’s at stake.”

“What *is* at stake?”

“Thanatos,” Grandpa said. “Thanatos is in a coma too, and he’s trying to wake up the same way I did.”

I paused to digest the information. My next question came with the tone of incredulous impatience. “How? How were you both in the same kind of coma?”

“It’s a long story,” Grandpa said, waving the thought away.

“I’m not a kid anymore,” I said in an outburst, offended by his dismissal.

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“I watched people *die* today, and I’m going to fight in a war because *you* sent me here. You *owe me* an *explanation*.”

Grandpa nodded to himself, knowing when he was defeated.

“Alright, Phillip,” he said, his eyes welling. “I’ll tell you everything. Where do you want to start?”

I drew a series of deep breaths. My emotions were getting the better of me, and I wanted to make sure I got the full story before the dream ended. It took a minute to compose myself, and I asked my first question. “Let’s start at the beginning. Who’s Thanatos? What does he want? Why is he in a coma? What does this have to do with me?”

“Okay,” Grandpa said. He drew in a deep breath, and after a moment, he began his story. “A long time ago, there was a talented coalescent who pioneered the idea of fighting in dreams. This man tampered with the nature of reality and expanded our understanding of coalescence by a factor of ten. This man was named—”

“Thanatos, I know.”

“No,” Grandpa said. “This man was named Abraxas. Abraxas was the commander of the Oneiroi, and he recruited other ‘gods’ to serve him. To each of his chosen servants, he gave an Abraxas stone and shared his secrets. One of those gods was the man you know as Thanatos.”

I narrowed my eyes, absorbing his words.

“Years passed as Thanatos served Abraxas—until his leader disappeared, along with most of his crew. Thanatos, however, went his own way and started a private agency called the Night Corps. At first, the Night Corps was hired to do the dirty work of mobsters and politicians.”

“The Night Corps was a contractor?”

“More like mercenaries,” Grandpa said. “People in power are always looking for assassins, and Thanatos agreed to target specific groups of people.”

“What do you mean, specific groups of people?”

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Grandpa frowned. The stench of death wafted over us as the breeze swept across the land. The vulture made a *gulp* that unsettled my guts. I clenched my jaw as I waited for his answer. It was difficult for him to continue.

“In order to understand this next part, you need some context,” Grandpa said. “Thanatos believed natural selection was being stunted. He thought weak people were being encouraged to disengage from productivity so they could reproduce, while the best people were relegated to a life of work, patching a system that kept them too busy for children. Because of this, he convinced many powerful people that the best way to help society would be to purge the weakest of mankind, flushing them away like a virus from its host.”

“What *kinds of people?*” I asked again.

“Thanatos was contracted to set up outside homeless camps, hospitals, nursing homes, and welfare centers. Innocent people. Helpless people. There, he would kill them in their dreams.”

My eyes lit with fire. Of all the atrocities I could’ve imagined, this seemed so much worse.

“During this era, I spoke with Thanatos, and he justified his actions by believing that, under a proper system of natural selection, they’d have already died. That they *deserved* this judgment. In his mind, he was a humanitarian reaper, strengthening our population by culling the weakest.”

“Is that when Mandala started fighting the Night Corps?”

Grandpa smiled a sad, disjointed smile. I saw through it immediately—the smile was a recognition of my innocence. An acknowledgment of my naivety.

“For a while,” Grandpa said, looking more tired than I’d ever seen him before, “Mandala *funded* the Night Corps.”

“What?”

“I didn’t learn of this until I was being considered for the Operations Director position, and when I did, I quit.”

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“There must’ve been a riot after news of this got out.” I scoffed. “Did anyone else quit with you?”

“No,” Grandpa said solemnly. “There was no riot. No revolution. No upheaval. This was business as usual. Standard government work. It’s far easier to keep your head down and survive than it is to take a stand and pay the price.”

“Are you serious?” I stared at him in disbelief. “Why the hell did you send me to Mandala? I thought we were the good guys!”

“You are,” Grandpa said. “You’re the bad guys too.”

A dozen possible futures shot through my mind. How fast could I run from Mandala? Was my contract defensible? Would they really chase me?

“I don’t want to be a bad guy,” I said.

“That’s why I felt comfortable sending you to Mandala,” Grandpa said. “Organizations are not inherently good or bad—they’re defined by the people who are in them. Not only would you be safer there than anywhere else, but I believed—and still do—that you would not be corrupted by them.”

I still couldn’t get over what Grandpa had told me. “People really just didn’t care their company was funding a eugenics program?”

“Unfortunately, there are a lot of people who agree with Thanatos. They’ll never say it outright, but you can always tell. People who hope for zombie apocalypses, pandemics, famines. They look forward to these afflictions because they think they’re smarter or stronger than the rest of society, and they believe these horrors would give them the opportunity to prove it. They think these apocalypses would purge those who are beneath them.”

“Those people are awful,” I said.

“I agree, and yet, everywhere you look, you find awful people, don’t you? But they’re not all stupid, and eventually, Thanatos agreed with us—eugenics wasn’t the solution to society’s problems. After years of killing, he looked around and found that not much had changed. Local governments received a

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temporary boon to their coffers as welfare recipients died, but the money saved didn't alleviate life for the hardest workers—it simply lined the pockets of whoever was in power. That was when Thanatos realized he was attacking a symptom of the problem and not the problem directly.”

“And what was the problem?”

“Corruption,” Grandpa answered. “Thanatos pivoted and started targeting politicians. *That* was when Mandala pulled their funding.”

“This guy really thinks he's the good guy, doesn't he?”

“The most dangerous people are always the most sure of it.”

I shook my head, recognizing that we'd gone off track. “So, what does this have to do with you?”

“Well, to answer that, we have to talk about your father. The only reason your father stayed with Mandala was because he knew the opportunity to end the Night Corps would come if he waited long enough. And one day, the opportunity came to try, and he assembled a small team consisting of Anberlin, Teddy, Nate, and Simon.”

“Simon?”

“Simon was... well, it turned out that Simon was a traitor,” Grandpa said. “As everyone prepared their assault, Simon lured Anberlin out of range and pulled him into an isolated dream. Simon tried to kill him, but your father found them first. He shot Simon point-blank, and that was that.”

There was an odd twinge inside my body. I'd never realized my father had killed anyone before, and I suddenly wondered how many times he had come back home and tucked me in with blood on his hands. How many nights had he read me a story after ending someone's life?

And if it was in his blood—was it in mine too?

“After that, everything happened fast. Thanatos tracked down your father and... killed him. That...” Grandpa choked up. “That was when I... That's when I went to kill Thanatos myself.”

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For the first time, I looked at Grandpa without the rosy-colored glasses of youth, and I was surprised by what I saw. He was a soldier; he always had been.

The locusts swarmed closer, and I tightened.

“Outmatched,” Grandpa continued, his voice scratchy, “I did something horrifying. I made a bomb to kill us both. But...”

“But what?”

Grandpa looked away, and a wave of guilt washed over his face.

“There was another person there,” Grandpa said. “A child, probably one of the neighbor kids, I don’t know. At the time, I didn’t care. I—”

I waited for him to finish, needing him to say it.

“I made a move to kill them both.”

I looked at him callously. More than a soldier, I was seeing him as a monster. And though Grandpa’s gaze fixed on a spot a thousand yards away, I knew he saw himself as a monster as well.

“I don’t remember how it ended,” Grandpa said. “All I remember was a bright white light as Thanatos, myself, and the child were consumed. I was ready to die, but... I didn’t. Nor did I wake up. Instead, I was stuck inside my own mind, shackled to a coma. Thanatos suffered the same fate. The story should have ended there, but it didn’t.”

“Because you woke up?”

“Because I woke up. And it was the worst thing I could’ve done. That’s why they’re after me. They want to know how I did it.”

“And?” I asked. “How *did* you do it?”

“I can’t tell you. If the Night Corps found out how I woke, they will tell Thanatos my secret, and he will awaken. If that happens, then the only thing I accomplished that night was the probable murder of an innocent child. I can’t have that. I *won’t* have that.”

“Grandpa, people are dying *today*.” I twisted my face to chastise him. “Just

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tell your secret to Mal and let Mandala deal with Thanatos.”

“You don’t understand,” Grandpa pressed. “Thanatos is the most talented coalescent I’ve ever fought. His imagination is unparalleled. His willpower is unmatched. He fears nothing. A few people dying won’t come close to the damage Thanatos would do if he came back. He can’t be stopped.”

“Can’t be stopped?” I stepped up to him, fists clenched. The locusts suddenly found themselves in our patch, and they devoured the wheat stalks closest. “I understand that you’re scared, but you’re being ridiculous.”

“I’m trying to save lives,” he pleaded.

“You’re letting people die,” I shouted. “Do you really think the *hundreds* of agents are going to fail against *one single dreamer*?”

“I don’t think a *thousand* agents could take down Thanatos. It’s not a numbers game. No number of soldiers can fight a nuke. Even in his prime, your father couldn’t scratch the man. The fact that maybe, just maybe, he held off long enough for Cassandra to run is a miracle in and of itself.”

I stared at him, fuming, and stormed off. There was nowhere to go, but I had to be anywhere else. This dead and dying land was more inviting than the conversation here.

“Phillip,” Grandpa called after me. “Phillip, don’t go.”

“Why not?” I shouted back.

“B-Because this is the last t-time we’re going to be able to see one another.”

My anger dissipated, turning to confusion. “What?”

“If what you’ve said is true, then I don’t think we’re going to see one another again,” Grandpa said. “I’ve been visiting you by using astral projection, but they’ll be closing off the facility soon. They’ll have to. Once that happens, I won’t be able to pass through.”

I stared at him, then raised my eyes to think. There, in the far corner of the sky, I saw the expanding darkness of the endpoint. Our time together was

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coming to an end. “There’s got to be a way around it. Maybe if—”

“No,” Grandpa stopped me. “There’s no way around it.”

“Well, maybe you can stay in Lucy, and we can hook you up to life support. You’ll be trapped in a dream forever, like your coma, but you’ll be safe.”

“I don’t know what Lucy is, and I have no interest in being a prisoner,” Grandpa said. “And if I come to Mandala, that’s what I’ll be—a prisoner. I have unfinished business to attend to, and I intend to see it through.”

I drew in a breath to argue, but I decided to let it go.

“Fine,” I said. “Can you at least tell me where you’re staying?”

Grandpa shook his head, his eyes pained and sad. “Phillip, the next time we see each other, it’ll be after I’ve stopped Thanatos from returning for good. Promise me you won’t tell anyone about our meetings.”

“Really?”

“I need this,” Grandpa said.

“You know what? Okay. Yeah. Fine. If that’s what you want, then sure.” I scoffed and shrugged callously. “I promise. In fact, I’ll pretend like none of this ever happened. I’ll just pretend you never woke up. That you’re still lying in that hospital bed and I’m too scared to visit. What difference would it make—”

The dream ended suddenly, and reality snapped back upon my cold, bitter words.

Chapter 33

A Waiting Room

I WOKE UP TO Teddy's voice over the intercom. The tone of his announcement was solemn, as though he were calling us together for a funeral wake.

“Good evening, residents of Mandala. This day has been a trial. During our demonstration of astral projection, the safety and order of our community was threatened. A total of thirty-four people died in an attack carried out by the Night Corps. There is no more question about it; we are at war.

“Winning a war is no easy feat. It requires the service and sacrifice of every soldier at its disposal, and therefore, it is imperative that we call upon the power and skills of every individual within our ranks. Consequentially, there will be a meeting in the auditorium for all students in the Coalescence Basics class. Today is sorting day.

“Additionally, we have made arrangements to secure our facility. As we speak, construction has begun to renovate our walls with deuterium. This added substance will help block outside alpha waves and prevent any further infiltration by the Night Corps. Safety and order will be restored by sundown. Please direct any comments or questions up through your chain of command. Thank you.”

There was a click, and his voice was gone.

Listening to the announcement, I finally understood the truth. I was going to be a soldier, whether I wanted to be one or not. Immediately, I had greater respect for Grandpa for stepping away when he did. My heart burned harder, and I wished I could go back and apologize.

With a burdensome weight on my shoulders, I rolled out of bed and

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trudged my way to the small auditorium on the first floor. Absorbed in thought, the halls compressed, and I arrived in no time. The seats were mostly empty, and it was just my class inside.

My eyes scanned the room and settled upon Samson, who was staring at the ground near the front, unmoving. Gingerly, I took the seat beside him. Samson took one look at me, stood, and moved across the room. Right away, someone else filled his seat, and yet I still sat alone.

A few moments later, Phoebe entered the hall and took a seat in the back by herself, not bothering to take a look around the room.

I swallowed hard and accepted this as my penance. I wasn't sure what I did to deserve it, but I knew I did. Even before joining Mandala, I had always messed things up; why had I expected it to be any different here?

Teddy entered. His eyes were narrow and focused as he took the stage. Anberlin was behind him, his face bearing equal intensity. Teddy tapped the microphone and leaned in.

“Welcome, everyone. Please listen carefully for your name to be called. When it's your turn, you will follow Anberlin to the back, where further instructions will be given.”

Teddy stepped away and Anberlin called out the first name. “Abbott, Carly.”

A girl in the second row stood up. Her legs trembled as she shuffled forward. Anberlin led her into another room and closed the door behind them.

I had been hoping for more information, but none would come. My legs jittered impatiently, and I wasn't alone in my anxiety. People were fidgeting, pacing, and praying. The only thing they weren't doing was talking. Somehow, we all knew not to talk.

Five minutes later, Carly Abbott burst out of the back room in tears. Swiftly, she stormed through the aisle and left.

Anberlin remained expressionless as he called out the next name. “Adams,

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Brian.”

A tall boy with short hair rose to his feet. He looked comfortable as he approached the stage, even cocky. Anberlin led him into the back room and closed the door. Ten minutes later, Brian emerged, visibly shaken but stable. With a nod, he passed by his friends before shuffling out of the auditorium. He was still within earshot when we heard him start crying.

As time passed, the list of names diminished, and each person left with a different expression. Some were sobbing, some were distant, and some were fine. There seemed to be little consistency in how people left the room.

“Logan, Samson,” Anberlin called.

Silently, Samson followed Anberlin to the back room. His test seemed to last twice as long as anyone else’s, and when he emerged, he was unfazed. If anything, he looked more determined than ever. He strode past me without a second glance and made his way to the back door. Along the way, he gave Phoebe a knowing look, and I swore I saw the uncharacteristic mark of empathy on his face.

The deeper I sank in my chair, the more my mind wandered. I thought of Aurora and wondered when I would see her again. I thought about Lucy and reminded myself to thank him for his attempt to save my life. I thought about my meditations, and how I’d forgotten to do them.

Breathe in... Breathe out...

The hours passed, and the room emptied. Soon, only Phoebe and I remained.

“Vedas, Phoebe.” Anberlin’s voice echoed.

Phoebe stood, and with a deep breath, she made her way into the back room. Now, I was truly alone.

In less than three minutes, however, Phoebe was sputtering out of the room, a sobbing mess. Automatically, I stood to comfort her, and, to my surprise, she ran up and gave me a hug.

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“Just let me know when it happens,” she said. “I’ll be there for you then.”

“When what happens?”

Was the symposium not her premonition?

Phoebe pulled away without another word and pushed past me to leave. I turned to chase after her, but Anberlin called my name before I got so much as a step in.

“Wolfe, Phillip.”

My hair stood on end, and I trudged on stage, ready for my soul to be weighed. Anberlin gave me a stressed, almost apologetic look before guiding me into the back room. This new room was tight, uncomfortable, and completely bare save for three cots. On one cot, a stranger slept.

“Who’s that?”

“He’s nobody,” Anberlin said. “Just lie down and fall asleep.”

I took a seat on one of the cots and stared at the ceiling. Anberlin adjusted the thermostat and took the only remaining cot. The vents hummed with mela, the gas making me colder and more nervous. Briefly, I wondered if I was going to be able to sleep, but luckily, mela gas was always stronger than my will to stay awake.



Chapter 34

Specialty Testing

EVERYTHING WAS DARK. I listened carefully for a few seconds, wondering if anyone was nearby.

“Hello?”

Nobody answered.

Did something go wrong?

My eyes adjusted to the darkness. I was in a cage, trapped behind a set of bars. Long chains with hard clasps at their ends dangled from stony walls. This was a dungeon, and I was a prisoner.

Suddenly, the lights flickered on. Across the room, on the other side of the bars, the stranger was sitting in a chair. His mouth was duct taped shut, and his hands were zip-tied to the armrests. He held his head low as Anberlin towered over with a fierce expression. A moment passed, and the stranger stirred. Upon seeing Anberlin, he flailed and moaned, struggling to break free of his restraints—but he was a dog leashed to a post.

Anberlin smiled. It wasn't warm and inviting; it was insidious and grim. Carefully, he circled the stranger and tipped the chair onto its hind legs. He pulled and the legs grinded. Nails on a chalkboard. The stranger's neck rolled side to side while he was dragged into better light. When Anberlin placed the chair back to solid ground, I found myself staring at the back of the stranger's head.

Anberlin circled round again, angling so that he could see both me and the stranger. Then, without warning, he slammed his fist into the stranger's face. It was so sudden and violent that my first instinct was to question reality. This couldn't be real, right? My second instinct, however, was to press up

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against the bars to make sure I was seeing things right.

Anberlin hit the stranger again, and a smattering of blood shot across the room. The stranger let out a sound and pulled hard against the chains but went limp after Anberlin struck a third time. Watching him hit with such ferocity caused my own cheek to burn, and I let out a noise that shocked me. To this, Anberlin stopped his assault.

“Anberlin?” I called out from the cage. “What is this?”

He said nothing and circled his prey, observing from all angles. As he entered the stranger’s blind spot, a wooden bat appeared in his hand. An icy feeling spread through my limbs, and he gave me a look as though I ought to approve of his actions. I called out to stop him, but it was too late. He lifted the bat over his shoulder and swung the club into the prisoner’s body, thrusting the man sideways. The chair tipped over, and the stranger slid along the concrete floor, still bound to the chair.

Immediately, I felt an excruciating headache. Moisture gathered near my eyes. I thought I was crying, but when I rubbed it away, I discovered blood.

Anberlin tossed the bat aside and let it clank horrifically against the floor. He took a lumbering step past me. I reached out to stop him, but he slipped from my grip without even a glance. Slowly, he approached the downed stranger and heaved him upright once more. The horrible screeching noise came back as Anberlin placed the chair front and center, but this time, the stranger was facing me.

With a lull, the stranger lifted his gaze and stared into my eyes. The duct tape over his mouth glistened in the low-hanging spotlight. His chest twitched, and he took shallow, sporadic breaths. As I looked over him, burning sores opened over my skin like hives, and my chest squeezed, stripping me of air. Physically, I was falling apart. It wasn’t in my head; it wasn’t something I was imagining—*real blood was dripping from me.*

“I suppose I should explain what’s going on,” Anberlin said, his gaze

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somewhere along the far wall. “This man here is Cameron.”

At the sound of his name, the bones in my face fractured a bit more, and the blood on my cheek thickened.

“This morning,” Anberlin continued, “we raided the Library of Prophecies, scouring for hidden files. We found some, and in one of those secret premonitions, we learned that Cameron has been trading information to Mal. He was selling out soldiers for a pittance. What was the rate, Cam? A thousand bucks a soul? Less?”

I looked at Cameron in horror, and suddenly, the pain stopped mounting. It was as if the spell had been broken and no more harm could be done.

How could he sell out his friends for money?

“I want you to watch this, Phillip,” Anberlin said, rubbing a bit of blood from the corner of his own eye. “I want you to see what happens to traitors in Mandala. Your test is to endure.”

Before him, Cameron grunted. From behind the duct tape, he mouthed words too muffled to understand. Anberlin shot me an impatient look before stripping the tape from the man’s mouth and letting him breathe.

“Anberlin, you’ve got it all wrong,” Cameron said, his voice desperate and pleading. “I’m not the traitor.”

“Is that so?” Anberlin held out his hand, and a gun plopped into his grip. “You’re saying Dr. Delphi framed you?”

“It has to be. Please.” Cameron turned to me, and our eyes connected. “You have to stop him. I’m innocent.”

My face burned like it’d caught fire.

“You lie.”

Anberlin aimed the gun at Cameron’s kneecap and fired straight down. The sound popped my ears. I collapsed, suddenly out of breath, an intense pain shooting down my leg. My body bent and twisted, and I screamed until the blood in my throat choked me. Agony passed through me like a wave until

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I couldn't take any more. I folded my body into a corner of the cell and whimpered. As my gaze fixed upon the ceiling, I found some relief, but still, I cried.

"Watch and learn, Phillip," Anberlin said.

I rolled to my side and forced myself to keep vigilant. *Why was I bleeding so much?*

"Snap out of it, Cameron. We have you dead to rights."

Cameron's pained grunts and gritted teeth became a nervous laugh. He chuckled to himself for several seconds, ending with a sharp sigh.

"Oh, you're right. What am I doing?" Cameron spat at his feet. "Fine. I admit it. I'm the traitor. So, what now? Are you going to kill me in front of a kid?"

"No," Anberlin said. "As part of his test, we're going to let the kid kill you." He took large, even strides to my cell, flipped the gun around, and placed it on the floor just outside the bars. "His fate is in your hands, Phillip."

I looked up at Anberlin in horror, then eyed the gun. With a painful twist, I rolled to my knees and hunched over, coughing blood into a puddle around the gun. My right hand reached through the bar, and timidly, I picked up the weapon. My hands were vibrating as I felt its heft, and the more I stared at the gun, the blurrier my vision became.

Anberlin tilted Cameron's chair, and the grinding of metal came back in full force. The traitor was placed in front of me, so close that missing my shot would be impossible. Cameron smiled and did nothing to fight back. A new pang of pain through my chest.

"Why did you do it?" I asked, my voice raspy. "Why did you betray Mandala?"

Cameron looked surprised by my question. He cast a sideways glance at Anberlin. "What difference would it make?"

"Did you believe... you were doing... the right thing?" I lifted the gun

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and pointed it at Cameron's body, slumping against the bars to hold myself upright.

Cameron thought a moment. "Yes."

My eyes drifted toward Anberlin, and I gave him a stern look. What was wrong with him? How dare he put me in such a situation? No, I wasn't going to do this. Even if it meant failing my test, I wasn't going to kill someone I barely knew. Slowly, I lowered the gun and placed it on the floor. Then, on my hands and knees, I crawled to a dark corner of the cell and folded into the fetal position.

"Phillip," Anberlin said sternly. "Phillip, you have to do this."

"No."

A coughing spell took over me, and I rolled around in a growing puddle of blood. I expected Anberlin's interrogation to continue behind me, but there was only silence. It lasted ten or fifteen seconds before the next sound came.

"Is that—?" Cameron's muttered, surprisingly even toned. "Are we done here?"

"Yeah," Anberlin replied, his voice suddenly soft and gentle. "Lights on full."

The room illuminated, but I shielded my vision from the light. Blindness was the only thing that assuaged my pain, and I wanted no more torment. Instead, I rolled around in a warm liquid that I could only assume was blood and shivered.

Across the iron gate, Anberlin and Cameron shuffled together. I heard a pair of snips and a groan of relief.

"Are you okay?" Anberlin asked, genuinely concerned.

I was about to answer when Cameron spoke first.

"I'm okay," he said. "Let's get your boy out of that cage."

Braving the situation, I looked over and found Anberlin and Cameron approaching the door of my cell. Together. Unified.

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I understood immediately. This was all an act. A play. They were in on it together. It seemed obvious in retrospect, yet I was so engrossed in it that I hadn't stopped to remember I was being tested.

The two test administrators entered and rolled me onto my back. Then they stared. They just stared. Their eyes combed over my body, and as they did, my wounds mended themselves. I'd seen this magic weeks before, when the Briar patched me after my tussle with Mal.

A drop of liquid fell on me, and my gaze lifted to see Anberlin bleeding. It was subtle at first, and then he broke out with an affliction of wounds. Suddenly, his whole body shredded, and he collapsed to the floor.

Cameron took over, pulling apart my shirt to check the bruises on my body. As he moved, I noticed he didn't appear to be as broken and beaten as he should've been. He'd been absolutely pulverized before my eyes yet looked no worse than if he'd fallen off a bicycle. But when my shirt was pulled aside, his appearance changed to that of someone who'd been hit by a bus. Cameron clutched his chest and backed away, hyperventilating against the wall. Conversely, my lungs filled with fresh air.

"Did I pass?" I asked.

Anberlin chuckled, stirring from the ground. He held up a finger before clearing his throat. But then he shook his head and sank back down. "We'll talk in the real world."

Though the room was still, it was anything but silent. All three of us were taking deep, audible breaths, enduring the rank of the dungeon. The more I looked at Anberlin, the worse I felt. The more he looked at me, the better I felt. This feeling was similar—though muted—when I looked at Cameron. For the entire rest of the dream, it felt like the three of us were trading injuries back and forth.

And then I realized—we were.

Each time I looked at a cut on Anberlin's face, I started bleeding in that

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exact spot. And conversely, Anberlin stopped bleeding. But as he looked over me, he was able to steal the laceration back. The pain was suddenly secondary to understanding the mechanism, but the dream ended before I could piece it together.



Chapter 35

Necessary Placements

I BOLTED UPRIGHT AND scrambled to my feet, backing against the far wall. There, I waited for Anberlin and Cameron to come to their senses.

“I’m sorry, Phillip,” Anberlin said, rubbing the corner of his eyes. “I know this was hard for you, but it’s over now. Trust me, I don’t like administering the test as much as you didn’t like living through it, but every army needs their soldiers in the right places.”

“Was all that really necessary?”

“Yes,” Cameron said. Anberlin remained notably silent.

“And you do this for everyone?” I asked, looking at Cameron. “Willingly?”

“We have our roles here at Mandala,” Cameron said. “Our job is to do them.”

“So, you’re okay with getting destroyed like this for every single student?”

Cameron smiled. “I actually prefer my part in this more than Anberlin’s.”

I drew a deep breath to calm myself. “Okay. So, what was the test for, exactly?”

“This test was designed to expose your capacity for empathy,” Anberlin said. “In the real world, you feel empathy on an emotional level. When someone feels pain, you share in that experience—but it’s only a feeling. In dreams, however, empathy is a pathway for physical energy to transfer from one person to another. In short, you can’t make a wound disappear; you can only absorb parts of it for yourself. You can literally share in another’s pain.”

“Why would anyone do that?” I asked.

“To save a life,” Anberlin answered. “A proper empath can absorb part

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of a wound that would kill one person and spread the damage across two people. This takes a life-threatening injury and makes it more benign, slowing the dying process. When it comes to dreams, time is the most precious commodity for survival, so if you can live long enough for the dream to end, then you can live.”

“Okay,” I said. “So, what was the test testing for, really?”

“Here at Mandala, we have four vocational groups,” Anberlin said. “Your level of empathy as observed in our exercise—along with other factors I’ve observed in class—determines your career path.”

“That’s all?” I asked, frowning. “It’s all just empathy?”

“Yes,” Anberlin said. “It’s all just empathy. You’ll learn how important that is over time.”

“Fine,” I said scathingly. “So, do you have a job for me?”

Anberlin looked at Cameron and shrugged.

“We’re going to figure that out,” Anberlin said. “You’re not an empath, that much is clear. Empaths are responsible for healing, but your empathy is situational, and your pain threshold is moderate. Compare that with Phoebe who was ready to die at every moment throughout her test, and you’ll see the difference. That’s what we need from empaths. You’re not quite there.”

I nodded, thankful for their decision. Enduring pain was not something I wanted to do as a full-time profession.

“You’re not a hunter either,” Cameron said. “You have *too much* empathy for that. You care too much about innocence and guilt, and that makes you susceptible to deceit, and blackmail, and propaganda. We need our hunters to do the bidding of Mandala—no questions asked. We need our hunters to pull the trigger.”

I thought of Grandpa who warned me that Mandala was just as much the bad guy as they were the good one.

“Samson became a hunter,” Anberlin said. “Not only was he bloodless in

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his test, but when he thought Cameron was the traitor, he asked to join in on my assault.”

“What would’ve happened if I fired that gun?” I asked. “Would it have killed Cameron?”

“No. The gun was empty. It would’ve clicked, and your test would’ve ended.”

“Mmm,” I grunted, and though my voice remained neutral, I was hiding a great deal of disgust. “So, what does that leave me with?”

“We’re in agreement that you’re best suited to become a supporter,” Anberlin said.

“And they do...?”

Anberlin and Cameron shrugged.

“Whatever they can,” Cameron said. “They’re a jack-of-all-trades.”

And master of none.

I saw through the classification right away. The supporter specialty was a catch-all for those with no real skills. The lame profession for those who sit there and watch. People who don’t amount to much. It was, unfortunately, perfect for me.

“So, what next?” I asked.

“You’ll continue attending class as scheduled,” Anberlin said. “In the near future, you’ll join a team and run missions on behalf of Mandala.”

I nodded, still trying to deal with my new trauma. Even though it was all a stunt, it was hard to look at Anberlin directly. And for what? To get told I was average? To learn what I already knew; that I wasn’t a hero who saves lives, nor an antihero who goes in with guns blazing? That I was just the guy who cried in the corner when things got too tough? Yeah, that sounded right.

“Is that all, then?”

“That’s all. You’re free to leave.”

I stood, feeling a phantom pain shoot through my leg where Cameron

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had been shot. It took a moment for me to gain my balance and make my way to the door, and I chastised myself until I remembered that I'd just been tortured as part of my job. That wasn't normal, and I was afraid I'd wake up one day and forget that fact. And if I did—what then?

Would I pull the trigger?

Chapter 36

A March into Shadow

I SHUFFLED OUT OF the room and made my way into the auditorium. My legs wobbled beneath me as residual adrenaline pumped through my body. The images of Cameron's torture kept popping into my mind. I'd been on the receiving end of some brutal things before but watching it happen to someone else was worse.

I was halfway down the aisle when I could no longer stand. My body collapsed into the nearest chair, and I drew deep breaths, partly to calm myself, and partly to quell my rising levels of nausea.

Breathe in... Breathe out...

I stayed put for several minutes, fighting through my buzzing thoughts. As I sat, the back door creaked open, and Anberlin slunk out with red, puffy eyes. The moment he saw me, however, he wiped the tears. The sight of him was jarring; I'd never seen him rattled before.

"You're still here?" His voice was halfway between a statement and a question.

I shrugged and looked away.

Anberlin stepped down the aisle and sat beside me. We exchanged no words for a while, and instead, simply breathed in unison. After a few minutes, he broke the silence.

"You know," he said, "I have to administer that test every year, and it kills me every time."

I faced him. "So why do you do it?"

"I don't know." Anberlin gazed at the door he'd just stepped out from, looking every bit the scared child that I embodied in the moment. "I guess I've never had the courage to say no."

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I looked away, unimpressed.

“Listen,” Anberlin started, “I want to show you something. I want you to see the toll it takes on my mind. Will you meditate with me?”

“I have a meeting with Teddy,” I said flatly.

“He’ll understand if you’re late,” Anberlin said. “This is important.”

I sighed. “Fine.”

“Great.”

Anberlin stood, and I followed him as he wound his way through the halls of Mandala. The atmosphere of the facility had never been bleaker. Those in my class meandered around with distant stares, and the foreign guests who had stayed an additional night looked as though they’d been awake since the symposium. As I passed, none of them looked at me, but all of them whispered.

We arrived at Anberlin’s room, and once inside, he offered me a cup of tea. I accepted it immediately. The liquid warmed me as it moved down my throat, spread through my stomach, and expanded through my extremities. As I held the cup with both hands, I noticed the surface of the tea was rippling, but the more I drank, the shallower the ripples became. Eventually, after many long minutes, the surface became smooth. As if this were some sort of cue, Anberlin moved to the thermostat and played with its dial.

“Lie down in the cot,” he instructed. “We’re going back to the barn.”

I moved to the corner of the room and lay flat. Anberlin sat atop a mat in the center of the room and took deep breaths. In and out... In and out... The rhythm lulled me. I matched its pace, and that, along with the small dose of mela he’d let seep into the room, did the job of putting me to sleep.



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I arrived inside Anberlin's mind.

He was in the middle of his barn, approaching a horse with both hands held up between them. The horse whinnied and bucked as Anberlin reached out to touch it, and as his hand brushed the creature's snout, the animal thrust past, shoving Anberlin to the dirt. A horrifying *thud* echoed around the barn as the horse slammed its head against the front doors, beating until the wooden beam holding them shut snapped in half. The doors flung open, and the beast clambered outside.

The *clip-clopping* of hooves was barely out of earshot when a small lamb scuttled in through the new opening. Anberlin stood and spread his arms, ready to embrace the beast, but it *baaed* and rammed head-first into his shins. By the time he'd regained his balance, the lamb had turned and was already gone.

"What's wrong with the animals?" I asked.

"It's exactly what you think," Anberlin said, rubbing his leg. "The animals reflect my conscious mind. And... I'm not feeling great right now."

I knew what he was going through, but... "What do you do to fix those feelings?"

"Fix them?" Anberlin smiled. "I'm here to understand and process my feelings, not fix them. Come, I'll show you."

I followed him outside, shocked by how much his land had changed. Before, the land had been bright, sunny, and green. Now, it was dark, shady, and grey. Dense clouds obscured the sun and cast a wide shadow over what had been a beautiful world. Worse was the smell. Gone were the fresh lilies and baby's breath—now it was rotting flesh and withering flowers. The scent of it all clung to the wind, and as Anberlin rounded the barn, we found the source of the stench. A hundred dead sheep lay scattered around the field. There was no blood, nor sign of assault. It was as if they were killed by a plague.

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“What happened?” I asked.

Anberlin didn’t answer. Instead, he moved past the animals, searching for one that might still be alive. Finally, he found a single lamb that was huffing its last breath. It was the same one that had attacked him moments ago. Slowly, he knelt beside the creature and rubbed his shaky hand deep through its wool.

“Shhh,” he cooed. “It’ll be okay. I’ll change, and you’ll come back stronger than ever. I promise.”

Anberlin waved me closer and beckoned me to touch the animal. I obeyed, albeit slowly, and when I rested my hand atop the lamb’s body, I felt a rush of energy sweep through me. It was hard to put the feeling into words because it was a feeling specifically tailored for Anberlin, but if I had to guess, it felt like the will to carry on. The feeling that you were working toward some goal you believed in. And it was dying.

The sheep struggled harder to breathe, and the feeling faded. Then, it was gone. The lamb stopped moving. There was a thunderclap from far away, and the lamb began to disintegrate. Its fur went coarse and broke off into a million pieces. A heavy wind picked up, and the sheep disappeared into the air, returning to nature as nothing more than dust. All the other sheep disappeared the same way until the field was nothing more than a barren pit. Anberlin let out a long, guttural sigh—a death rattle of sorts. Then, he closed his eyes and wept.

I waited patiently, not sure what to do. For thirty minutes, Anberlin cycled between breathing exercises and active sobbing, feeling no shame in his grief. I let him have his space and stared at the sky as dark clouds merged and twisted.

And then, all at once, the spell was over. He stood, wiped his tears, and regained his composure.

“I know where the source of my pain is,” Anberlin said, turning toward a forest on the edge of the horizon. “It’ll be a long, emotional journey to the source, so I understand if you want to end this here, but if not—will you follow

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me as I travel through the depths of my mind?”

My eyes trailed after his, and my hair stood up on end. The forest was far away, just a black patch against the sky, but as I looked at it, I couldn't shake the feeling that the whole world was watching me back. A part of me wanted to wake, but a voice deep down in my soul told me to stay.

“What's in there?” I asked.

“Forgiveness, I hope.” Anberlin paused. “Or self-hatred. It depends on how ready I am to face my afflictions.”

“Why do you want me there? It sounds like you'll be extremely vulnerable there.”

“All young men should see what happens when you ignore your emotions,” Anberlin said. “Feelings aren't just noise; we evolved them for a purpose. If you're to grow, you'll need to confront these emotions. You're right—I'll be a mess out there; it's important you see the value of being okay with that.”

“Okay.” I nodded. “I'll come.”

Anberlin stepped off. I followed behind, taking large strides through the vast plain. As we marched, things were eerily quiet. No animals, no rocks, no shrubs—nothing. But the farther we got from the barn, and the more complicated Anberlin's emotions became, the more unruly the world appeared. We trudged through a patch of rough brush, and sadness overcame me. Then anger. Then grief. Though these feelings had always been present in the air around me, they were much stronger as we neared the forest.

Soon, the dark clouds opened wide above us, and a drizzle sprayed us. Each rain drop held a feeling, and I felt guilty over things I'd never done. Ashamed over thoughts I didn't think. The rain turned to hail, and just as the water changed its form, Anberlin's emotions coalesced into new feelings. Anger and remorse formed bloodlust. Sadness and guilt became loathing. Failure and disgust turned to hatred.

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Through all this, I realized how hard Anberlin was on himself. Any misstep, mistake, or accident weighed on his soul with mind-crushing pressure. Even taking it secondhand, it was heavier than I could handle.

The looming shadow of the forest grew ever bigger as we approached, and the first tendrils of darkness washed over me as we stepped into the elongated shade.

“So, we’re going all the way into the woods, right?” I asked.

“Right.”

“What’s in there?”

“The worst parts of me are there, lying in wait.” His voice was shaky. “Beasts and monsters formed from my mistakes. If I face them and learn to forgive myself, then the world will go back to how it was. But if I fail, the darkness will spread to destroy every aspect of my personhood until I’m just a shell of myself.”

As we approached the edge of the tree line, Anberlin clenched his fists and marched through his fear, stopping right at the threshold. There, he closed his eyes and worked to create a weapon. Objects flickered through his hand. For a moment, he held a gun, but it disappeared. Then, there was a spear, but it also disappeared. Last, he conjured a silvery-blue sword, and that was what remained.

“Listen, Phillip. I need you to understand something,” Anberlin started, his eyes opening to lock onto the wall of trees. “No matter how much I’m bleeding, I’m going to be okay. My life is not in danger here, and no action you take can help or harm me. Do you understand?”

I nodded. “So, what next?”

“Next,” Anberlin started, “we march into shadow.”

The first push past the foliage was rough. Briars and thorns scratched my arm as we pushed through the leaves, and as the first drop of blood swept down my arm, I felt infected by a poison that turned my thoughts against me.

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I'm worthless.

I'm evil.

I'm irredeemable.

Suddenly, darkness. The foliage was dense above us, and the light only illuminated a small patch ahead of us. I followed as Anberlin swung his sword to chop stray vines, branches, and shrubs that lay in our path.

We walked for hours toward the center of the forest, and progress was slow. A thousand eyes prickled at me from creatures slinking around the pitch-black shade, just out of sight. Whenever I looked toward them, they'd scuttle away, and I'd feel a heavy weight on my heart. But Anberlin's focus wouldn't waver, and he led me deeper and deeper into the heart of the woods.

I was wondering how much longer it was going to be when he finally stopped and glared at a spot in the darkness. I expected a monster to jump out from a bush or an animal to emerge from the shadows, but for a long time, nothing happened.

“What are we waiting fo—”

Anberlin shushed me by raising a finger, focusing hard on something. I followed his stare, and my gaze landed upon a pair of beastly eyes. The eyes were attached to a slender body that slunk toward us on all fours with the grace and ferocity of a panther. Then it emerged—a great cat-like creature with a pair of protruding canines. The creature was all-black in the same way that closing your eyes produces a black void; it was an emptiness rather than color. And it snarled like a Sabretooth tiger.

Anberlin's breath went shallow. His muscles tensed, and his hands clenched around the hilt of his sword. Fire entered his eyes, and in an instant, he was ready to fight.

“Is that what you've been looking for?” I asked, taking steps away from the battleground.

“Yes.” Anberlin's eyes narrowed.

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The beast let out a snarl, and Anberlin met it by holding his sword between them, two hands on the handle. As the beast circled, Anberlin followed suit, and they moved like a pair of boxers. The beast ignored me as it passed, but even from my distance, fear fluttered in my chest.

What if the beast attacked me?

I needed to be prepared. My eyes closed, and I pictured a knife, but no matter how hard I thought, the knife wouldn't appear. It was like there was a wall blocking the object from entering the world.

"Anberlin," I started, "should I—"

Anberlin glanced toward me, and the creature seized its opening, bolting forward and snapping its jaws at Anberlin's flesh. Anberlin whipped his arm around and knocked the beast's head with the bottom of his sword. The beast fell away to one side, and Anberlin fell to the other.

Built like a cat, the beast was quicker to its feet, and it sprinted back to Anberlin. As it ran, I noticed Anberlin had a clear shot to stab it in its face, but he hesitated. Without mercy, the beast took advantage of Anberlin's weakness and pounced atop his body.

Anberlin fell backward to the ground, and his sword slid across the dirt, falling out of reach. To protect his throat, Anberlin held up his hands, and the beast bit. One long tooth pierced down his palm and lodged itself halfway through Anberlin's forearm. He screamed.

"I'm sorry, Phillip! I'm so sorry!"

I bolted forward to help, but Anberlin stopped me.

"You can't help," he grunted. "My fight!"

Blood gushed out of him, and he pressed harder into the monster's tooth. Painfully, he twisted and, with his free hand, he punched the beast. It absorbed blow after blow until Anberlin shunted sideways and sent the beast slamming against a tree, dislodging the tooth from his arm in the process. Anberlin scrambled to his feet, his injured hand hanging limply by his side, and the

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monster recovered slowly, crawling back to all fours. The two of them resumed circling.

I eyed Anberlin's sword with hope. It had slid a few feet away from me, and if I could get it back to Anberlin, maybe he'd stand a chance. My feet rolled gingerly along the dirt, and I traced the blind spot of the beast as I crept my way to the blade. In steps, it lay by my feet. I bent and tried to lift it, but the sword was impossibly heavy. Worse, touching the hilt bombarded me with a flurry of emotion, and I coiled back away from it.

"This is my mind, Phillip," Anberlin shouted. "The sword only exists within me, so you can't—"

The beast leapt, and with one hand useless, Anberlin couldn't shunt it aside. Instead, he took the blow head-on, and the beast sank its teeth into his shoulder. Anberlin screamed again, and I clenched my fists.

I have to do something.

But there was nothing I could do. Every time I spoke, the beast attacked. Every time Anberlin saw me, he got pummeled.

But maybe... Maybe that wasn't a coincidence. Maybe I was a reminder of his moral failure. A token of his inability to stand up for what's right. Maybe that's why my presence got him hurt. And if that was the case, maybe there *was* something I could do to help.

"I forgive you, Anberlin!" I shouted. "You were doing what you thought was right."

"But what I did was wrong!" Anberlin shouted.

"And I still forgive you!"

Rallied by my words, Anberlin surged. With a jerk and a shrug, he sacrificed his shoulder and slipped away to safety. Blood soaked the side of his body.

Satisfied, the beast tossed the fresh meat back and forth in its mouth, gnashing it viciously. It believed itself to be victorious, and by all counts, it

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should've been. But Anberlin wasn't finished. With great effort, he hobbled to where his sword lay and took a knee to pick it up.

Seeing Anberlin's final resistance, the beast launched into a sprint. It kicked up a cloud of dirt on its path to end the fight before leaping through the air. I knew it was over.

But Anberlin was swift. He snatched the sword off the ground, fell to his back, and drove the tip of the blade through the beast's mouth. The blade pushed through the monster, searing straight through the dark fur and out the other side.

With a heave, Anberlin twisted and pushed the monster to the side.

He won.

But at what cost?

As the dust settled, Anberlin lay back against the ground and growled in pain. His eyes closed and his whole body arched with tension. I rushed forward to tend to his wounds, but still, there was nothing I could do. Empathy didn't work here, and nothing I imagined became real. He was going to bleed to death.

"It's okay," Anberlin assured me, his breath heavy and deep.

"You're going to die."

"Not... for real," Anberlin wheezed. "This... isn't a dream. It's... my mind." He groaned and adjusted his body. "If I die here, I'll just... wake up."

"But—"

"Trust me," he said. "I can wake up any time I'd like."

"So, wake up."

"Not yet," Anberlin said. "I have one more thing... to show you." He rolled to his side with a painful grunt. "Come..."

Anberlin tried to stand, but he'd lost too much blood, and he immediately crumpled. My arm found its way around his only good shoulder, and I helped pull him to his feet. Together, we hobbled toward the beast's unmoving

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carcass, and I placed Anberlin on the ground beside it. The beast was tensing and whining, deep in its death throes. I expected Anberlin to remove the blade from its mouth, but instead, he lifted his hand and petted the monster with a tenderness that matched how one would pet a dog in the middle of euthanasia.

Anberlin didn't have to invite me this time. I leaned forward and placed my shaking hands on the creature's dark fur. Dense emotions flooded me. There was guilt, remorse, and shame alongside a million other complications. But the turmoil was evaporating by the second.

"Thank you," Anberlin said to the dying beast. "Thank you for teaching me how painful it is to break my oaths. You died so I could grow, and I am grateful for your sacrifice. Go, now. You're free."

Comforted by his words, the beast's body disintegrated as the sheep had done before. Once it was gone, Anberlin toppled sideways and sat upright against a tree trunk. The look on his face was no longer of anguish, but of peace.

"There," he said. "Now we can..."

I expected Anberlin to say 'wake up', but something deeper in the woods stopped him dead. I followed his gaze.

A woman was standing at the edge of my vision, a shadow amongst shadows. She was beautiful, but unsettling, and my stomach tied itself in a knot. There was a stiff breeze, and when a patch of darkness faded, I saw the true horror of this vision. Though her feet were planted firmly on the ground, a black noose was tied around her neck with enough slack to bend the rope.

"Anberlin," the lady pleaded, her voice ethereal. "Help."

Something primal stirred within me, and a knot of dread formed in my stomach. "Who is she?"

"Audrey," Anberlin said, trying to remain calm—for whose benefit, I wasn't sure. "My wife."

"What's she doing here?"

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“She’s waiting for forgiveness,” he said. He tensed, as though he were about to stand, and then resisted the urge.

“Aren’t you going to—”

“No. She’s a trap. A lure. A hook that will drag me to deep despair.” He shook his head. “I’m not ready for it.”

“But she needs our—”

“I said *no*.”

“Please,” the lady begged, her voice strained. “My love.”

Anberlin drew a deep, uneasy breath and looked away.

To his indifference, a dark pit appeared beneath the lady’s body. The void started small, no larger than an apple, but it expanded at a steady pace. The shadow of Audrey began to move, and her legs flailed about in search of solid ground to root herself. It was an awkward, horrific affair, and as death loomed closer, she begged louder and louder for intervention.

“Anberlin! *Anberlin!*”

Suddenly, the hole became too big, too consuming, and the woman fell in. I watched breathlessly as the noose went taut, and a *crack* echoed around the forest, sending every creature scrambling away. The sound reverberated, building itself into a mountain of echoes before dwindling into silence. Then, it was over.

Anberlin finally glanced at the hole, and its expansion resumed. It sped toward us, threatening to consume all, but before we fell in, Anberlin opened his eyes.



I stared at Anberlin in silence, hoping he would give me answers, but for the

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first time in our friendship, he didn't. A few minutes passed, and the glazed look on Anberlin's face waned. Slowly, he stirred and moved to prepare some more tea.

My eyes drifted toward his clock, and I noticed that, despite feeling like we'd been meditating for hours, only a few minutes had passed.

"Anberlin... are you... okay?"

Anberlin sighed and forced a smile on his face.

"Listen, I want to thank you for joining me, Phillip. You might not feel like you did anything, but your support gave me a lot of strength. I'm truly sorry about the test we administered, and I promise I'm never going to do another one. If Teddy fires me, then that's that, but I'm through."

"I—"

"I'm okay, truly," Anberlin said, not making eye contact. "You have a meeting with Teddy to go to, don't you?"

He's asking to be left alone, I realized. "Right. Thank you for sharing this with me."

With a smile, Anberlin collected my cup, picked up his mat, and escorted me to the door. I said goodbye and walked away. Behind me, I heard a sigh, and it took me a moment to place what kind it was. The sigh wasn't filled with anxiety, or rage, or depression like so many I'd heard around Mandala; it was filled with serenity. It was the first time I'd ever heard one like it.

Chapter 37

A Power of the Gods

WHAT AM I GOING to tell Teddy? I wondered as I marched toward the elevator. I still didn't know where my grandfather was, nor did I know how to find him, so this was going to be a waste of both our time.

I wish I could've meditated with Anberlin a little longer.

I was rattled by the appearance of Audrey, but I trusted Anberlin knew what he could handle. He'd face whatever that was in due time.

The elevator doors opened and a couple operatives emerged. As they passed, their voices fell into a hushed whisper. Though I ignored them, I couldn't *truly* ignore them.

I ascended to Teddy's office and found his door was locked. He was in a meeting with another person. Quietly, I waited with my back against the wall, and my mind went blank. The trance was snapped, however, when Phoebe's voice came booming from Teddy's office.

"No! I can't accept that! I won't!"

I inched closer to the gap in the door and pressed my ear against it.

"You're going to have to," Teddy said. "That's how it's always been, and that's how it will always be. Fate doesn't yield for anyone."

"I'm not talking about stupid one-off prophecies!" Phoebe slammed something heavy against Teddy's desk. "There are hints in the footnotes. Notes in the margins. Legends through history. I'm telling you, Teddy, transcendence is possible."

I perked up. Was she...

"It's not possible," Teddy insisted, level-headed and even-keeled. "I promise."

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“Let me find out,” Phoebe said back. “At least let me try.”

Silence filled the room, and I imagined them staring at one another. Nearby, a side office opened, and an operative popped out into the hall. I jerked away from the door and tried to act natural. The operative smirked knowingly at me as he passed, but he said nothing. Once gone, I pressed my ear back up against the door.

“—nobody who has attempted transcendence has walked away with their sanity or life,” Teddy said. “Look at Ursula Delphi. Do you think she’s always been so...?”

“Just tell me how it works,” Phoebe said. “Then, I’ll tell you how I can do it.”

“Fine,” Teddy said, relenting. “It’s a level above you, anyway. Transcendence involves meditation. Whereas serenity is the meditative goal for coalescents, transcendence is the meditative goal for precognitors. It involves the manipulation of alpha waves to produce a clear channel through your mind. The idea is this: a precognitor is wired to pick up signals from the fourth dimension of time, but a transcendent could *theoretically* read the signals coming from the fifth dimension.”

“That makes sense,” Phoebe said. “But what does it mean to see the fifth dimension?”

“I told you it was above you,” Teddy said. “The fifth dimension regards the *diversion* of time. It’s all the potential paths of fate. Every outcome of every decision can be found in the fifth dimension, no matter how unlikely. If you search there, you won’t just find the answer you’re looking for, you’ll find answers to questions you were never asking. So long as it’s possible within the limitations of the universe, there’ll be a path to any outcome.”

“I want it,” Phoebe said.

“Well, you can’t have it,” Teddy said, like he was scolding a toddler. “The last person who tried to attain it left here for an asylum.”

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“I’m not them. I can handle it.”

“You think so?” Teddy leaned forward in his chair. It creaked beneath his weight. “This power comes at an exorbitant cost. The world is not black-and-white. Consequences are not zero-sum, and no decision you ever make will fix every problem. Would you save an innocent child from drowning if you knew they’d grow up to be a serial killer? If you only had time to stop one, would you save a drunken teenager from a car crash, or a single mom from a drive-by? Would it even matter once you knew how everyone died anyway?”

“I—I don’t know,” Phoebe stammered.

“And you’re smart enough to know there’s no good way to die,” Teddy said. “Death is either sudden and violent, or drawn out and emotional. As a transcendent, you’ll get to experience the pain and emotions of *everyone’s* death *all the time*. That’s the reward that awaits you, you know. The guilt would crush you to the point where you wished you were dead—if insanity didn’t reach you first.”

“There are good things about transcendence too, though,” Phoebe said. “I could—”

“You couldn’t do anything before you gave in to the horror.” Teddy leaned back, and his voice got airy. “Even good things will be stripped from you. Imagine going through the emotions of a break-up before *meeting* the man you were going to fall for. Imagine knowing every gift you’ll ever get for your birthday. You’ll never have another pleasant surprise, another happy moment. And life will grow stale. These are the things that define humanity, so even under a best-case scenario, you wouldn’t have anything left to feel human about.”

“I don’t care about birthday gifts,” Phoebe said, scoffing. “I want to save people.”

Teddy sighed heavily. “Listen, I know you think you’ll find the path where everyone wins, Phoebe, but there is no path like that. Sometimes, bad things

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happen to make way for good things. We endure to learn this truth. No perfect path will *ever* exist. You think you'll be choosing between greater goods, but you'll only ever be deciding between lesser evils. Omniscience is a power of the gods; let it remain so."

Nobody said a word for a full minute. My ear was aching from pressing it against the door, but I wasn't about to pull away.

"But if I succeed..." Phoebe started, her voice nearly a whisper, "Will I be able to save the people I care about?"

"Yes," Teddy admitted. "At an insurmountable cost."

"There is no cost like that," Phoebe said. "Not for me. Look, the bottom line is this. You're at war, and you could use a transcendent on your side. You must let me try."

Teddy sighed, loud and defeated. "Fine. Take this slip to Anberlin and ask him to teach you. But good luck convincing him. He knows *personally* what this path entails. I doubt he'll want to risk repeating the horror he's lived through."

"Thank you." She slid a piece of paper off Teddy's desk. "You won't regret it."

"Yes, I will," Teddy said. "Now go."

I backed away with haste, but the door opened before I had time to fully retreat. Suddenly, I was face-to-face with Phoebe. She stopped in the doorway and stared at me, stunned. There was an awkward moment where neither of us knew what to say. Then she forced a smile.

"Phillip," she said, letting the door close behind her.

"Phoebe."

She drew a deep breath and shook her head.

"Listen, I'm sorry I've been avoiding you. I've—" she paused to look down at the paper in her hand. "We need to talk about your grandfather."

"What?" In an instant, all my reservations about what I'd just heard disappeared. "What about him?"

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“Not here,” Phoebe said, casting a nervous glance around the hall as another operative stepped out from behind a different door. “Meet me in Lucy after your meeting. In the secret room. Find me there.”

“But—”

She pushed past me.

“Wait!”

She didn’t. I watched with a pit in my stomach as she stormed off toward the elevator, and I was caught halfway between wanting to chase her and needing to talk to Teddy. But as the elevator doors closed her off, I knew my choice was made. I had to speak with Teddy first. With a deep breath, I turned toward Teddy’s office, flattened my expression, and entered the room.

“Phillip!” Teddy said, his voice bright, masking his emotions. “Have a seat.”

Nervously, I sat across from him.

“Listen, Phillip. I want to make sure you’re okay.” Teddy folded his hands before him. “You’re okay, aren’t you?”

“I’m fine.”

“Good,” Teddy replied, taking a glance at his watch. “Say, have you been able to reach your grandfather at all? Have you talked to him?”

I shrugged, wanting to tell Teddy everything I knew, but I couldn’t. Grandpa had me promise to keep his visits a secret, and while I was livid about Grandpa’s cowardice, I was in no mood to betray his trust. Phoebe asking to talk about Grandpa had me on edge, too, because it meant there was something going on I didn’t understand. So, did I want to tell Teddy everything I know about Grandpa? No. But I didn’t want to lie either.

“I don’t know where Grandpa is.” My words were careful, teetering on the truth. I’d seen him and talked with him, but I didn’t know where he was.

“So, Henry woke up from his coma and disappeared?” Teddy asked, his eyes narrowing. “He had one visit with you, and you never saw him again? Am

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I understanding that right?”

“You are, sir.”

Seeing him in dreams doesn't count as seeing him in person.

But Teddy was smarter than I'd given him credit for.

“And you haven't seen him in dreams either, have you?”

This was it. His question was too direct, and I had to make my choice. I either had to help Teddy capture Grandpa in service of the greater good, or I had to endanger more lives while giving Grandpa the chance to finish his business as a free man. I had no doubt that Mandala would care for him, but for as deep as my imagination went, I couldn't possibly see how they'd ever let him live a full life outside of a gilded prison. Grandpa was correct—the *safest* path was the one where he was captured or dead, but this was the moment where I had to decide what the *right* path was.

I swallowed hard. If Phoebe could stand her ground, I could too.

“No, I haven't seen him in any dreams either.”

The only thing I hated worse than lying was waiting to see if the other person bought it. Teddy studied me for a long moment before frowning and nodding.

“Well, alright, then.”

“Am I good to go?” I asked.

“Not yet,” Teddy said, turning to his computer and lifting a pair of reading glasses. “I heard you earned the vocation of supporter. Congratulations.”

“Thanks. It's an honor, I guess.”

“It *is* an honor,” Teddy said, typing lazily. “Anberlin's a supporter too, you know, and he's requested to take you on for private studies next semester. Is that something you'd be interested in?”

“What?”

“He wants to work with you as a mentor,” Teddy reiterated, looking at me from above his spectacles. “Would you like that?”

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“Yes,” I said, sitting upright in my chair. “Of course.” He was the only instructor here who could teach me to meditate. The only one who could show me how to grow.

“Great, I’ll pair you up. Now, you’re good to go, but if you uncover any information about your grandfather, come tell me right away. Okay?”

“Okay,” I said, bolting to my feet. I moved toward the door quickly, trying not to raise suspicion. As I neared the exit, however, Teddy stopped me.

“And remember, Phillip—” Teddy turned his monitor and exposed the front cover of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, “—that’s a direct order. Understood?”

I nodded stiffly.

“Understood.”

Without another word, I sped through the door and scrambled out of his office. I needed to see Phoebe, and I needed to see her *now*.

Chapter 38

Life and Death

I WAS ABLE TO push Teddy's veiled threat from my mind rather quickly, given the way I raced to Lucy. The elevator opened right away when I pressed the call button, and I sped inside. Then, down, down I went, deep into the heart of Mandala. Level Two had been virtually empty since the Symposium due to the stench of death clinging to the air. While this made it easy to find Phoebe, it made it harder to fall asleep, and I fought the mela gas much longer than usual.



I stepped out into Lucy and headed north. By now, I'd made the journey to the secret room so many times that it felt unnatural to go anywhere else.

Phillip. I'm glad you made it out of the symposium alive, Lucy said. *What happened? How did everyone wake up?*

"I don't know," I said. "And I have something really important I need to do. I can't talk right now."

I understand.

I marched into the middle of the field, and in minutes, I was shuffling around the dirt, searching for the handle to our secret trapdoor.

A little to your right, Lucy said. *There you go.*

My fingers latched onto the handle, and with a hard pull, I ripped the door open. Phoebe was against the far wall, holding a candle. She stood when I entered.

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“What’s wrong with Grandpa?” I asked, hoisting myself into our hole. “Is he okay?”

Phoebe drew a shallow breath. “Hey, Phillip. Maybe you should—”

“What’s *wrong* with *Grandpa*?”

Phoebe tightened and stared at the ground. By her expression, she hadn’t expected my aggression. I softened and allowed her time to collect her thoughts.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I just need to know.”

“On the night before the symposium,” Phoebe started, rolling her hands uncomfortably, “I... I...”

“What?”

“I had a prophetic dream.”

I remembered the way she destroyed her room.

“In the dream, I saw your grandfather.” As she spoke, I could see her retreat into her mind, pulling the details from the depths of her memory. “Sunnyside Hospital. Room 214. He had stitches all over his body. I think he was stabbed. He was fine, but then he started to shake. And...”

“What?”

Phoebe brushed a teardrop from her face. “He died, Phillip. The last thing I saw were doctors rushing in to record the date, and then the dream ended.”

I froze, devastated. How could she have dreamt of Grandpa’s death and not told me? My mind raced with options.

“Did you see what day it happened?” I asked.

Phoebe shied away. “I don’t want—”

“Phoebe. When does he die?”

“I can’t—”

“I *know* you know,” I said. My eyes narrowed. “When does he die?”

A tear swept down Phoebe’s cheek.

“Be brave, Phoebe. Let me fight.”

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She lifted her chin and looked straight down into my soul, hoping empathy could steal the wound she was about to inflict. But it wouldn't.

"He dies today," she forced herself to say.

The world stood still.

I could stop this, right? I could get to him in time, couldn't I? I bolted upright, shoved the porthole open, and scrambled out to the surface.

"No," Phoebe called after me. "It's too late."

I didn't care. I needed to reach him before he died. I needed to see him one last time. The last time we spoke, it was awful. I couldn't let him die like this.

My senses went wild as adrenaline pushed through me. A bird flapped overhead. Specks of dust swirled through the wind. Dozens of noises washed through my ears. I was an unstoppable machine as I sprinted toward the Exit Pad. There were only two or three people waiting for the door to open, and I skipped ahead of them all to take the next ride out.



I sped through Level Two as fast as I could and hurtled into the elevator to jump to the surface. Suddenly, everything was moving too slowly. I jammed my finger into the surface button a dozen times before the doors closed.

Is fate trying to stop me? I wondered.

No, I countered. *I'm going to make it. I'm going to beat the prophecy.*

The elevator opened, and I squeezed through the smallest gap I could. My car was on the far side of the parking lot, and I made it there in no time at all. Just before starting it, I sent a text to Grandpa.

'I need your help. It's urgent.' I figured this would garner the quickest

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response.

With the accelerator pushed all the way to the floor, I sped out of the parking lot and drifted into traffic. The speed limit meant nothing as I rushed down the busy road.

My phone vibrated. My heart calmed for a moment, and I could breathe again—until my phone vibrated a second time, then a third. I stopped at a red light and checked the messages.

'Help,' was the first text.

'She,' was the second text.

The final text was nothing more than a random string of letters.

My hands clenched around the wheel. The red light was taking far too long to change, and I was suddenly *sure* this was a sign that fate was working against me. But I vowed it wouldn't get the best of me.

Not this time.

With white knuckles, I slammed down on the gas pedal and burst through the light. Immediately, red and blue sirens flared up behind me. Suddenly, I was running from more than fate—I was running from cops.

It doesn't matter, I thought, moving my rearview mirror so I couldn't look back. *Grandpa's dying.*

My phone vibrated once more in my lap.

'I love you very much, Phillip,' he texted.

I was confused. How could this text be so perfect? The message so concise? Was he in danger or not?

The hospital loomed straight ahead, and I pulled to the front. My feet pounded rapidly as I ran inside, the cops closing in. The receptionist tried to greet me, but I blew past her to get to the patient's floor. My heart pounded as I bolted up the stairs three steps at a time.

Room 214, I thought, repeating it in my head. *Room 214. Room 214.*

The door slammed open behind me, and the stern voice of an officer

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called out. “Stop!”

But I didn’t stop. I couldn’t. My eyes scanned the numbers as I passed by the rooms. I knew I was getting close to Grandpa, and I didn’t care what the police would do to me after I got caught. In this moment, I only cared about saving Grandpa.

“Stop, or we’ll shoot!”

210... 212... 214!

I slammed the door open and bolted into the room.

But I was too late.

Dr. Delphi was standing over the unmoving body of my grandfather. In her hand, she held a blood-soaked knife. On her face, she wore a triumphant smile.

Chapter 39

Change the Future

DR. DELPHI MET MY gaze, and her smile faded. “Oh...”

She stepped toward me, and I backed out of the room. In the hallway, an officer blocked the exit, standing between me and the stairwell. He shouted something, but I couldn’t process his words.

“Look. Room.” I couldn’t think straight. “In the look.” I was hyperventilating.

The officer pointed his firearm at me. I lifted my hands high above my head.

“Look in the room. Help.”

The officer took a careful step forward, using his free hand to unclip a pair of handcuffs.

“You have the right to remain—”

Room 214 opened, and Dr. Delphi exited, her clothes stained in blood. The officer’s attention shifted, and his gun turned toward her. She remained unfazed.

“My name is Ursula Delphi,” she said. “I’m of sound mind and spirit, and my actions have been of my own volition. The man in that room is dead. I killed him, and I am ready to face the consequences.”

Emotionless, she placed the knife on the ground and fell to her knees.

Her dispassion. Her detachment. Her demeanor. It disgusted me. How could that traitor be so calm about murder? I wanted to wrap my hands around her neck. To grab the knife and stab her. I’d do anything to hurt her, but as Dr. Delphi faced me, I realized how pointless it would be. I saw it in her eyes; they weren’t icy and distant as usual; they were soft and warm. For once, she was authentic. This was her true self—the self she’d been hiding away from us

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all. She was a psychopath, beyond humanity.

“I’m sorry, Phillip,” Dr. Delphi said. “I wish it could’ve been—”

“Burn in hell,” I spat.

Suddenly, Dr. Delphi straightened, wiping any sign of emotion from her posture. “Thanatos will return,” she said. “He *will* come back.”

And with that, she broke, and a river of tears poured down her face. The whole display was messy and confusing, prompting the officer to step carefully into arm’s reach before wrangling the murderer to the ground. With a knee on her back, he cuffed her hands and radioed for backup. Behind him, a pair of doctors filed into Grandpa’s room and shouted for assistance.

“Phillip?” The hospital’s receptionist placed her hand on my shoulder. “The doctors are going to do what they can to save him. Let’s give them space to work, okay?”

I peered up at her soft expression, and my hatred of Dr. Delphi gave way to my worry about Grandpa.

“Is he going to live?” I asked, tears welling.

“If they’re shouting for medical attention, then he’s not through yet,” she said. “Come to the lobby with me. We’ll get you ready to stay overnight.”

She helped me to my feet, and I shot one final glare at Dr. Delphi. Her face was red as she remained pinned to the floor, and there, she sighed. The tone of it infuriated me. It sounded like Anberlin’s. It was relieved. Content. Blissful. She didn’t deserve that. She didn’t deserve another moment of peace or serenity in her entire fucking life.

The receptionist and I trudged downstairs, and as my adrenaline dissipated, my thoughts caught up.

“Why was Grandpa admitted?” I asked. “Is he okay?”

“He broke his foot a couple of days ago. Said he was rushing to his car and tripped. Old age will do that to you, you know?”

I thought back to my last dream with Grandpa where he was limping, and

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an echo of guilt passed through me. It was probably my text that caused him to rush and fall. It was probably my fault he was here.

“You can have a seat,” the receptionist said, opening the lobby door for me. “Once we know more about your grandfather’s condition, we’ll have a doctor come get you.”

I thanked her and retreated to the back of the room. My thoughts were destructive as I waited, and I lost myself in a series of daydreams. These were not visions I was proud of, nor were they filled with sentiments I would ever admit to having, but still, the fantasies comforted me.

In the lobby, I waited for the police to escort Dr. Delphi out, but they never came. Instead, as I watched the doors, a familiar person burst in. Phoebe, her bright-red face covered in so many tears that they’d stained her shirt, ran to the receptionist before being directed toward me.

Once in earshot, Phoebe asked, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I said. “Thanks for coming.”

“Samson’s coming too. He’s parking the car.”

Just as the words left her mouth, Samson entered the lobby. He took a troubled glance around the room and circled around to get to me. We stared at one another silently, not sure what to say. Finally, after a tense minute, Samson hugged me. I hugged back, and it was the best hug of my life.

When our arms unlocked, the three of us took a seat. There was a long period of silence, and the longer it was quiet, the more we yearned to open up. Samson was the first to crack.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his eyes glazed. “I’ve been a dick. I blamed you for the symposium attack, which was stupid, and then I ignored you when you needed me the most. Phoebe talked to me about what you might be feeling, and I understand more about your perspective. I’ve just... I’ve been emotional, and I’m not used to being emotional.”

“It’s okay,” I said.

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“No, it’s not.” Samson stared directly into my eyes. “I’ve never lost anyone before, so I didn’t know what it was supposed to feel like. And now, I’m waiting for my dad to wake up from his coma as though it’ll ever happen. You, though... You’ve lost your father, and your mother, and now your grandfather. I—”

“Grandpa’s still alive,” I said, stopping him short. “And until a doctor comes to tell me he’s dead, I’m not giving up hope. Mark my words, he’s going to live.”

Phoebe opened her mouth to interject but said nothing. Her silence was deafening. She shared a concerned look with Samson before turning back to me.

“Phillip—” Phoebe started.

“No, I get it,” I said. “You had a prophecy, and that’s that, but...” I shrugged. “But what if we did it? What if we’re the first to change the future?”

“Phillip...”

“No, I—” I held both my hands up and spread them as though I were clearing the air. “I’m not listening. Maybe you told me about Grandpa at exactly the right time, and maybe I stopped Dr. Delphi before she killed him.”

I looked at Phoebe, sweating desperation, but she didn’t look convinced. If anything, she looked more nervous than ever. She opened her mouth but was cut short by a doctor bursting into the room.

“Mr. Wolfe?” the doctor called to the lobby.

I stood, and the doctor approached.

“You’re the grandson of Henry?” the doctor asked.

I nodded. Behind me, Phoebe gripped Samson’s hand. There was a tight pause as the doctor chose their words, and for a moment, I worried Phoebe was right. But then they spoke.

“He’s stable,” the doctor said. “We have him stitched up and conscious. The wounds he received were shallow and we’re expecting a full recovery.”

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The tears I'd reserved for sorrow came out as joy, and I flashed a smile to Phoebe as if to say, '*see?*', but she only looked more upset.

"Would you like to see him?" the doctor asked. "He's been asking for you."

"Can my friends come?" I asked.

"I'm afraid that's not a good idea. In times of trauma, it's best to keep things in the family."

"Go ahead," Phoebe said. "We'll wait here for you."

"We'll wait all day," Samson affirmed.

I nodded and hugged them both. Samson's hug was strong, but Phoebe's was gentle. She didn't get it; we were allowed to succeed. Free will was ours to own, and the universe could never take it from us. Come midnight, she'd see it as I did.

My body was full of energy as I followed the doctor into the back, and I swaggered through the halls as though I were gloating to the world. The doctor led me through the hospital the way I came, up the stairs and around the bend. We passed rows and rows of doors that meant nothing to me until finally stopping at room 214.

I stood outside the door, reminiscing about the last time I'd visited. Like then, it felt like the door would open and I'd step through to a new life. But this time, as I stared at the door, I considered the future. I pictured myself caring for Grandpa as he recovered, helping him find a stable place to hide from those who were hunting him, and sneaking him out to fish. As I lifted my hand to open the door, I felt as though we were destined to move forward as a family. Truly, I believed our story would never end.

Chapter 40

A Feckless Path

GRANDPA'S ROOM WAS NOT what I expected it to be. It was spotless and orderly, with everything in its place. There was not a drop of blood or speck of dirt to be found, and in the middle of the room, where I expected to find an old man on the brink of death, I found Grandpa upright and energetic. He was chubby and spry, a far cry from when I last saw him.

Instantly, I forgave him for everything. For running, for hiding, for being scared. All I could think of was how nice it was to have him awake, alive, and present.

"You're here," he said, booming. "Right on time."

"Hey," I said. "You look good."

"No, I don't," Grandpa chuckled. "I look like a strip steak that's been poked with a fork by a kid who won't eat me."

"I—" I shrugged half-heartedly. "Okay, fine. You look alive, and that's worth something."

"Alive." Grandpa smiled. "I'll take alive."

Steadily, he motioned for a handshake, and I met it. Our palms clasped together, and we performed the notes of our secret handshake, finishing on an even snap that filled the room. For the first time since the symposium, I felt like everything was going to be okay.

I took a seat by his bedside and scooted closer.

"I'm glad I found you in time," I said. "Dr. Delphi might've done a lot more damage if I hadn't come."

Grandpa swallowed uncomfortably. "Yeah. About that. How *did* you find me?"

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“Phoebe had a prophecy, so I raced here to save you,” I said proudly.

Grandpa’s smile dipped a little. “Interesting.” He paused to think it through and feigned a new smile. “Did you travel here from Mandala?”

I nodded.

“And how is it there? Things must’ve changed since the symposium.”

I stifled a chuckle and stared at Grandpa in awe.

“You were nearly stabbed to death, and the first thing you want is an update on my life?”

While my tone was playful, Grandpa nodded earnestly.

“You would not believe how often that is the only thing I want,” Grandpa said. “If I had it my way, I’d listen every day as you described the most mundane details of your life. I’d be riveted by the flavor of coffee you drank in the morning, enthralled by the conversations you had with your friends at lunch, and captivated by your choice of entertainment at night. So, tell me, how are things at Mandala?”

I smiled, appreciating his sentiment. “Well, honestly, I don’t know if Mandala is the right place for me. I mean, I like Anberlin and my friends and stuff,” I continued, “but it’s a lot of work. Did you know they make us watch someone get tortured before assigning us a specialty?”

Grandpa perked up. “They placed you in a specialty already? You must be way ahead of your class.”

I shook my head. “No, no. They needed to place us earlier than usual so we could prepare for war.”

“Oh, well...” Grandpa’s voice trailed away. “That’s not good, is it...”

I couldn’t help but laugh at his understatement.

“No,” I said. “That’s not good.”

“So, what’s your specialty?” Grandpa asked. “Where did they place you?”

“I’m a supporter,” I said, reluctant to admit it.

“That’s amazing,” Grandpa said. “I’m so proud of you.”

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I shrugged. “Isn’t it just where they put you if you don’t have any other skills?”

“Oh, no. It’s where they put you when you could have *all* the skills.”

“Yeah. A jack-of-all-trades,” I said duly. “Having no special qualities hardly makes me worthy of a specialty.”

“Let me tell you a secret,” Grandpa said, leaning forward. “If you desire it, a jack-of-all-trades *could be* a master-of-all. It means you’re in balance, and when you’re in balance, magic happens.”

“Maybe,” I said. “Or maybe it means I’ll be a jack-of-*no*-trades.”

“Of course that’s possible,” Grandpa said, leaning back again. “But if that’s a fate you wish to avoid, then you have the power to choose so. You know, I was very jealous of my supporter friends. I wished I could be just like them.”

Somehow, this was the first time it occurred to me that Grandpa had a specialty.

“What were you, then?”

“I was an empath,” he said.

I made a face that said, *yikes*, and Grandpa smiled.

“Oh, it was worth every cut,” he said. “Plus, I learned how to deal with excruciating pain.” He gestured toward his foot, and my gaze swept past a few dozen stitches on the way to his cast.

“Yeah, how’d that happen?” I asked.

“I’m *old*,” he said, his jovial voice returning. “The only thing I have to do to break a bone is look at it wrong.”

“Are you sure you weren’t rushing to get to me after the symposium?”

Grandpa looked at the ceiling and smiled. “We can both be right.”

I chuckled, if only to relieve the tension. Inside, however, a ball of guilt tightened around my heart.

“Maybe when you heal, maybe we can skip town together,” I said. A part

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of me hoped to catch him off guard with my casual tone, but Grandpa gave me a puzzled look.

“You can’t leave. You signed a contract.”

“I know, but...” I sighed, and the breath came out alongside two months of stress. “This is the second time I thought you died. I want to go back to how things were. I want to go play catch, or—”

“I’m too old for catch,” Grandpa said, shaking his head.

“Then we’ll make paper cranes and watch T.V. It doesn’t matter what we do, I just want to have you as family again. I want it to be like the old days.”

Grandpa paused, and his mood turned pensive. With a grimace, he adjusted his position and turned away from me. I gave him space to think for several seconds before asking, “Did I say something wrong?”

He shrugged and adjusted again.

“There’s a photo album in the drawer,” Grandpa said. “Would you mind getting that for me?”

“Uh, sure.” I slid open the nightstand drawer and found both a photo album and an inhaler of mela. The inhaler gave me pause. I didn’t know they made it like that. I pocketed the thought and nudged the inhaler off the album before handing the book to Grandpa. His wrinkled hands gripped each side of the book, and he admired the golden letters on the cover before prying it back. On the first page was a picture of him standing next to his wife—my grandmother.

“You miss her, don’t you?” I asked.

“I wish you’d gotten a chance to know her before she died,” Grandpa said, rubbing his finger across the image. “She was lovely.”

I liked the way Grandpa grew starry-eyed when he talked about Grandma. Truly, from all I knew about her, she was a special person.

“Can you tell me about her?” I asked.

To my request, Grandpa lost himself to nostalgia. His imagination

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must've been vivid because his eyes wandered all around the room. Every few seconds, he'd draw a breath and act like he was about to dive into a story, but then he'd stop and stare at the wall. Finally, he shook his head.

"No," he said. "She was far too much of a person for stories. But she was wonderful with a big heart, a strong work ethic, and all the patience the world had to offer. When she died, I thought my world had ended, so I threw myself at work. I was so afraid to pick myself up and move on that I let life pass by without putting anything into it."

I pursed my lips as Grandpa turned to the next page. There, slipped into a film of plastic, was a Polaroid of an infant.

"Is that me?" I asked.

"That's your father," Grandpa said, his voice misty. "He was a quiet baby. Very obedient. I swore he understood what I wanted from him before he learned his first word. It was that attitude which made him such a hard worker, you know. He was a man of priorities."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Grandpa said. "Did he ever tell you about his sleep schedule?"

I shook my head.

"Well, he used to sleep while you were at school and work while you were asleep. I asked him if that was to protect you from dream sharing, and do you know what that old coot told me?" Grandpa chuckled to himself. "He said that he kept this schedule so he could maximize the time you two got to spend together."

"Really?"

"Yeah," Grandpa said. "Your father knew what was important and worked to cultivate the things that mattered to him." Grandpa's arms dropped, and the album draped over his lap. "I, however, worked far too much in my life. And now that I've arrived at my twilight years, I can see how little difference I've made in the world."

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“Don’t say that.”

“Why not? It’s true. My life has been meaningless, and I regret how much time I wasted. I wish I would’ve lived a life of substance—or at least one of freedom and pleasure. Instead, I worked to make the dreams of other men come true and failed to commit to anything of my own.”

I knew he was being too hard on himself, but I wasn’t sure how to comfort him, so I kept my mouth shut. After a long period of silence and a wistful sigh, Grandpa lifted the album and flipped to the next page.

Here, he lost himself, looking over the images with a distant stare, letting memories flood his mind. There were pictures of my father’s first steps, my father’s first day of school, my father’s black belt ceremony. There were pictures of my grandmother dancing, drinking, and doting on Grandpa. He flipped and flipped and flipped, and I waited for my face to appear, but it never did. Instead, somewhere deep into my mom’s pregnancy, the book ended.

“Where’s the rest?” I asked.

“I stopped taking pictures after your grandmother died,” Grandpa said. “I could never move beyond that moment, and because of that, I missed all the *life* that came afterwards. You were the light of my world since the moment you took your first breath, and now I’ve got nothing to commemorate that.”

“Well, hey. I’m here now. You don’t need pictures if we’re already together.”

Grandpa nodded but didn’t look at me. “I need you to understand something, Phillip. One day, I’m going to die, and when that time comes, I don’t want you to wonder how things could’ve been different, okay?”

I nodded, but it was only because there was nothing else I could do that would make any sense.

“So,” Grandpa said, shutting the photo album, “your desires to go back to the way things were? It’s a feckless path. There is no running from your obligations. No disappearing to the mountains or moving back home. The only

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thing you can do is avoid the mistakes I made. Choose the path you want to walk before you're shoved down the path someone else chooses. Either way, when I die—due to old age or something else—you'll have to move on."

I said nothing. Frankly, I wasn't sure how our conversation had arrived here.

"Do you understand?"

"After you're gone," I started, "which'll be in many, many years," I added, "I'll move on, sure."

Grandpa nodded, but there was no light in his eyes. Instead, they were glazed and tired. He yawned wide, and I dismissed his absence of emotion as exhaustion.

"Alright, Phillip. I need some sleep. It's been a long day." He pointed to the stitches in his stomach. "A very long day."

"I'm not going to leave just yet," I said. "Not until midnight at least."

"Midnight, huh?"

I bit my tongue, worried I'd just given away too much information, but Grandpa didn't question me.

"All right," he mumbled, his eyes closing. "But can you promise me something?"

"Anything."

"No matter what happens," he said, "don't fall asleep."

"Huh?"

"Just promise me, Phillip."

"Why?"

"Promise me you'll stay awake."

"No."

"Yes." Grandpa's eyes drifted toward me. "For my sake."

I sighed deeply. "Okay. I promise. But can you tell me why?"

He didn't answer. Instead, comforted by my words, he was quick to drift

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into a calm sleep. It was quiet and peaceful, and I hoped it was every bit as enjoyable as it looked.

Gently, I plucked the photo album from his grip and placed it back in the drawer next to the mela inhaler. The minutes passed, and each second that brought us closer to midnight gave me a bit more hope.

As I waited, my mind wandered. I couldn't believe all I'd done since we last saw one another. I'd been working at the retail store then, which felt like another life now. A part of me found it funny that I never called in to quit. Another part of me found it funnier that Andy never called to officially fire me. It was like we both knew my time there was over. And what a time I've had since.

It was ten o'clock at night, then half-past ten, and then eleven. I wondered if Phoebe and Samson were still in the lobby, and I debated whether it was time to go see them. At half-past eleven, I stood, ready to let them know it was okay to leave, but as I opened the door, I was stopped by a noise.

Grandpa's heart monitor spiked.

I thought it was a glitch until it happened again. And then once more. Panic swept through me, and I rushed to Grandpa's beside. There, I nudged him, but he didn't move. I pushed harder, but still nothing. And then Grandpa uttered a word that sent me into a spiral.

"Mal."

Did he mean to say it? Was it just a sound that came out as I pushed him? What if he was—? What if she was—?

His heart rate monitor exploded and the readout on his screen doubled—then tripled. An alarm sounded, letting medical teams know to come. A fear rushed through me, and I knew the medical teams would push me aside when they arrived. What if Mal *was* attacking him? What if the prophecy wasn't about the stabbing, but rather an attack in his sleep? And what if I could still stop it?

If I were going to help, I had to do it now.

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I slammed open the drawer and lifted the mela inhaler. The plastic tip was cold against my lips, and I held hesitation for breaking my promise.

Was it better to keep a promise or to do the right thing?

As I watched Grandpa arch in pain, I knew my answer.

With a tap, I huffed as much mela as I could and collapsed to the floor.

Chapter 41

The World's Greatest

THE LAND WAS DRY, and the sky was scorched. I tried to breathe, but the putrid smell of sulfur flipped my stomach. My eyes darted back and forth as I tried to make sense of the hellscape, but my senses were overstimulated to the point of disorientation. There was a flash of light on the far side of a hill, blossoming to the sky. A shockwave followed, sending shards of debris overhead. This, I knew, was where I would find Grandpa.

I ran toward the destruction, adrenaline carrying me through an violent gusts of wind, and when I reached the crest of the hill, I stayed low to peer into the valley below.

Grandpa was in the center of a field, shuffling backward. I opened my mouth to call out to him but stopped myself when I noticed he was running from a cloud of ash. My eyes traced his and landed upon a shadowy figure snaking through the smoke and shadows.

Mal.

I sunk lower as my heart lurched. I wasn't supposed to be here. This was why.

Grandpa turned and sprinted as fast as his frail body would allow him, but his broken foot wouldn't carry him far. Desperate, he created a gun and twisted around to fire into the void, but Mal was quick to defend herself. She whisked a steel slab from her imagination and propped it up before her. The slab hung in the air for half-a-second—long enough to absorb Grandpa's bullets—before toppling to the ground.

“Weak,” she called out, her stride never slowing. “You’ve gotten so weak.”

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Grandpa's legs pedaled backward until he tripped over a mound of dirt. Scraping and scrambling, he continued to crawl on his back.

"It's futile, Henry. It's been written in fate a dozen times from a dozen angles. We both know how this fight ends. I will break you. Come morning, you'll have told me your secret and died."

"If I die tonight," Grandpa said, "it'll be with my secret lodged deep in the back of my throat."

Mal chuckled. "If that's where you're hiding your secret, then that's where my knife will go to claw it out."

She blurred into shadow, melding with the darkness around her. Her movements were hard to discern against the backdrop of chaos, and Grandpa fired blindly at anything dark and moving. But no shot came close, and Mal struck like an animal, pouncing upon him and shoving him flat to the dirt. There, she drove the blade of a knife through his open palm and pressed down hard. Grandpa howled, but the more he struggled to break free, the deeper Mal's knife dug. Soon, the handle was all that was visible while the blade sank through to the soil beneath.

"You see, Henry?" Mal cackled. "You never stood a chance."

Grandpa contorted, not willing to give up. In response to his resolve, Mal slapped his face. Glee spread through her, and she slapped him again and again, batting him back and forth like a lion with yarn.

I stood from my hiding place and panicked, not sure what to do. If I entered the brawl, I'd be a liability, but if I didn't join, Grandpa could die. The only way to stay put was to force myself to believe that if Mal wanted Grandpa dead, she'd have killed him already. My only hope was that I was right.

With ease, Mal straightened her posture. She was straddling Grandpa, and a long finger brushed the outline of his cheekbone.

"Now, Henry," she said. "I need to know one thing. How did you wake from your coma?"

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“I’ll never tell.” Grandpa bared his teeth. “Just kill me and be done with it.”

“I’m not going to kill you,” Mal hissed, pulling a new knife from the depths of her mind. “We haven’t had enough fun. See, there are a thousand places I could cut you before you bled to death.”

She tipped the knife against the divot of his shoulder.

“A thousand places I could hurt you.”

She moved to his heart.

“We’ll see how strong you are without your eyes, or fingers, or—” she placed the knife against Grandpa’s inner thigh and raised an eyebrow.

To this, Grandpa smiled. And then he laughed. It was bold and callous, filling the air with boisterous defiance. Finally, it simmered, and when he spoke next, his words were soft and biting.

“You think I’m afraid of you? Afraid of pain? Maybe it’s time I remind you who I am.” He pulled his hand from the soil, the knife still lodged in his palm. “I am Henry Wolfe, the world’s greatest empath. There is no pain I won’t endure. No pain I cannot imagine. Therefore—” he narrowed his eyes, “—no pain I cannot inflict.”

Grandpa roared, and a sphere of debris appeared from thin air. Bricks, spikes, and blades swirled about in a maelstrom, bludgeoning Mal off his body. She skittered to dodge the attacks, and in her distraction, Grandpa stood.

Weaving in and out of the whirlwind, Mal’s body began to contort, seemingly growing smaller. It was a strange sight, and I wasn’t sure I was seeing it right. But as her arms folded in on themselves, I knew it wasn’t a trick of the eye. She was shrinking.

Grandpa noticed, and with a guttural breath, a pair of machine guns appeared on either side of him. He screamed, and the air cracked with thunder. An endless fountain of bullets spewed from the twin barrels, and smoke filled the arena.

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Mal's only move now was to cloak herself within a steel bunker and wait for the assault to end, but this was also foreseen. Grandpa conjured a missile that dissolved the walls of the box and blew it away.

For a moment, there was a perfect storm in the space Mal stood, and his all-out assault left the world scarred beyond recognition. Grandpa pushed himself to his very limits, clutching his chest to control the flux of creation.

And then the onslaught ended.

It was as if he'd held his breath for too long, and when he gasped for air, the stream of creation stopped. Everything that moved splattered to the dirt, and Grandpa fell to one knee.

I peered through the smoke, squinting to see a sign of his victory. Without the body of Mal present on the arena, it seemed as though he'd done it. But then, there was movement. An object the size of a football rocketed across the battlefield and latched onto Grandpa's face. It was a raven, and it clawed wildly at his eyes.

In a panic, Grandpa ripped the bird from his head and tossed it aside. When the raven stirred next, I could hardly believe what I was seeing. The bird was growing and expanding, folding itself over like origami. Human body parts stretched out from each limb, and finally, Mal's head emerged. Her feet planted to the ground, and she stood tall and unharmed.

My eyes widened. If Mal could transform into a raven, that meant...

It was *her* infiltrating Lucy. This one answer begged many more questions, but I had no time to consider it further. On the battlefield, Grandpa rolled his neck and caught his breath.

"Do you know how I killed Thanatos?" Grandpa asked, plucking the knife from the middle of his hand. "How I pushed him into his coma?"

"How?"

"I'll show you."

Grandpa retreated into his mind, and as he strained, blood spurted from

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the wound. At the sight of it, empathic energy coursed through me, and I felt a sharp pain stab me in the center of my palm.

“Ah, you wouldn’t kill your healer, would you?” Mal asked. She pointed to the closing wound on his palm and cackled.

Grandpa snapped himself out of his vision, a half-formed bomb dropping to the dirt.

“Ah,” Mal said, enjoying herself. “So, it’s true. You’ve accidentally brought me a friend.”

Panic kept Grandpa rooted. He looked between the wound and the world, trying to find out where his unexpected guest was hiding. This opened a new opportunity for Mal to strike. With the momentum of a train, she shoved Grandpa over and placed a hand over his face. There, she rubbed it into the soil. Grandpa squirmed, blinded by mud, until Mal whipped a gun from her imagination and held it to his head.

The struggle stopped. Silence pervaded.

“Come on out, stranger,” Mal shouted out, her voice echoing around the valley. “Come out, or I’ll shoot!”

I pinned myself to the backside of the hill, but dread chilled my veins.

“You have five seconds! Five!”

She began counting, and I froze.

“Four!”

I always froze. It made me a loser. A coward. A fraud.

“Three!”

It didn’t have to be like that. I could choose a different path. I could fight. I’d done it before at the symposium. I could do it again, now.

“Two!”

My hands clenched into fists, and I shoved my fear aside. I couldn’t beat her one-on-one, I knew. But maybe I didn’t need to. After what I’d just seen from Grandpa—

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“One.”

I stood and shouted. “Hey! Over here!”

Both my arms waved through the air, and I took off down the hill. As I ran, my eyes stayed locked to Grandpa, and I absorbed as much of his pain that I could. Wounds tore through me like scissors to paper, dealing a hundred lacerations at once. Blood clogged my nostrils and the skin on my hand ripped open. My right eye disintegrated and blood poured around my left. With a heavy limp, I ran, keeping what little vision remained fixed on Grandpa so he could attempt one last assault.

And as Mal’s eyes traced me, Grandpa delivered. He pulled a gun from his mind, took aim, and fired.

Mal screeched, and though blood trickled from her abdomen, it wasn’t enough. The shot needed to be fatal, and it wasn’t. For all intents and purposes, he’d missed. Mal snapped her attention back to Grandpa and procured a sword from her thoughts. With a powerful swing, she sliced his hand clean off. His severed fist—enclosed around the gun—toppled to the ground.

Grandpa screamed. A moment later, empathy tore a chasm through my own wrist, and I screamed too. With our best chance to kill her having passed, the next best option was survival. I turned to flee, but Mal was hasty in her pursuit.

“Come here.”

Mal unfurled her hand to reveal a whip. With a flick, she sent the coil of it in my direction. It wrapped around my body, snapping tight around my torso. Her toes dug in the soil, and she pulled, dragging me face-first toward her. The dragon tattoo on her wrist was practically swimming around the dreamcatcher mandala, its tail wagging like a dog.

As I slid across the ground, sand dug into my open wounds. As excruciating as that pain was, it paled in comparison to the guilt that festered inside me. We’d both been captured, and this time, it *was* my fault. I’d failed.

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Mal pulled until I was face-to-face with Grandpa, and then she stopped. I stared at him, finding his one healthy eye glazed, half-closed, and fading. His left hand held the lump of flesh where his right hand used to be, shielding it from my vision.

“Now *this* is fate,” Mal said, gloating. She moved to Grandpa, her grimy fingers pulling his face toward her. “I’ll give you one chance. Tell me the secret to your awakening, and I’ll let you both live. Refuse—” she turned her gaze toward me, “—and I’ll kill you both. What’ll it be?”

Her offer dangled before Grandpa like a carrot, and his face scrunched as he debated the best course of action. Then he closed his eye and cried.

Chapter 42

The Meaning of Life

“DON’T DO IT, GRANDPA. Stall a little longer and we’ll all wake up.”

Mal placed the tip of a knife against my temple and pierced the edge of my skin, just enough to send a drop of blood sweeping down my face.

“I’ll have him dead before the endpoint comes,” Mal said. “The only winning move is to talk.”

“Grandpa, let me die. Please. This is my fault.”

“Even if you both died, it wouldn’t stop me,” Mal spat. “Your deaths might delay Thanatos’s resurrection by a year or two, but I know all about Mandala’s Omega Project and their foray into the revival arts. In fact, a little eye in the sky told me it’s received more funding since Nate Logan fell into that coma. My victory is just a matter of time.”

“Don’t listen to her,” I said. “They arrested Dr. Delphi. Mal doesn’t have anyone on the inside of Mandala.”

Mal’s cackle filled the valley. “That’s how far behind they are. Mandala has no *idea* who’s leaking information to us.”

I assumed she was bluffing, but when Grandpa closed his eyes and deflated, I realized I’d had it all wrong.

“What?”

“Dr. Delphi isn’t the traitor,” Grandpa said. “She came to kill me as—”

“Enough,” Mal said, pushing the knife deeper into my skin. “The clock is running out, and you have a choice to make. Would you like me to spare your grandson’s life, or would you like to take your secret to a family grave?”

“Don’t,” I whispered.

“If Thanatos is truly in the same state I was in—” Grandpa started, his

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voice breaking at the seams.

“*Don’t*,” I said again a little louder.

“—then he’s stuck inside a meditation. To awaken, he must sustain serenity.”

“He’s already cleared his mind,” Mal said, tightening the knife until I winced. “He feels at peace.”

“No,” Grandpa said. “If his surface world is empty, then he’s only attained temporary serenity—a fleeting state of peace. Now that the surface-level distractions are gone, he can meditate again and travel deeper into his psyche.”

“Deeper? What will he find deeper?”

“There will be two beings,” Grandpa said, grunting as a spurt of blood gushed out from his wrist. “The first will be his id, a representation of his pleasure drive. It’s the pushing toward things that have brought him pleasure in the past. Eating, drinking, addictions—things you do when you need a fix. Feelings you give in to, even when you don’t want to.”

“And the other?”

“The second being is his superego, a representation of his perfect imagined self. It’s the pulling toward things he expects will bring purpose to his future. Helping others, serving humbly, working meaningful jobs—things you do because society told you it’s valuable. Both beings are real aspects of himself that contribute to his personhood, yet, together, they are incomplete.”

“Right,” Mal said. “Because his avatar represents the ego. I get it. But how will these beings end his coma?”

“If he kills the id or superego, his mind will realign, and he will awaken.”

“It’s that simple?”

“There’s nothing simple about it,” Grandpa said. “But if he succeeds, his life will be changed forever. But be forewarned: killing one being will strengthen the other. You may not like what becomes of that. What new obsessions that will bring.”

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“But he’ll be awake?” Mal asked.

“Yes.”

The secret meant nothing to me, but Mal was seduced by his song, fully satiated by the knowledge she’d been hungering for.

“Now, I’ve told you all I know,” Grandpa said. “Please, let Phillip go.”

Mal hesitated, not ready to release her bargaining chip.

“Who did *you* kill?” she asked.

“I killed my superego.” Grandpa sighed bitterly. “Now, all I want is to fight, but I can’t, because I must give in to my fear of death. I’m half the warrior I was when we last met, and it’s entirely because of my choice. So—” he raised his eyes to meet Mal’s, “—tell my old friend to think carefully about the path he chooses.”

Mal smiled and nodded, mulling over this new information.

“Now—my grandson?”

Mal lifted her arm, withdrawing the knife. Then, she stepped back and cut through each layer of twine that held me. The bulk of it fell to the ground, and I drew a deep breath. But the knife didn’t stop. It kept going, and going, until—
I gasped.

A dull sensation pricked the skin on my back. This was followed by a soft pinch snapping through the front of my chest. When I looked down to see what happened, I found Mal’s knife sticking through my body.

She’d stabbed me.

“My apologies, but I must escape.” Mal backed away and blew a kiss toward Grandpa.

A gun appeared in front of Grandpa, and he whipped his arm to snag it from the air—but with his dominant hand gone, he missed the handle. Mal’s body contorted, and she shrank back to her raven form. By the time Grandpa had dived atop his weapon and seized control of it with his left hand, Mal was gone.

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I toppled, splashing into my own puddle of blood. Grandpa crawled toward me, a horrible scraping against the dirt, and he settled in the space beside me. Using the full heft of his body, he dragged me to his lap and positioned me sideways. There, he forced his good arm around my body and gripped the knife handle. Another subtle but horrifying noise sounded, and I grunted in pain as the blade was pulled free. Twisting and convulsing, I found myself staring at Grandpa.

“I’m s-sorry...” I whispered. “I just wanted to s-save you...”

“No,” Grandpa said. “You’ve had to live with the consequences of my actions and inactions for too long. I hope you can forgive me.”

“Of c-course,” I said, forcing the words out as blood clogged my throat. I struggled for air. My brain fogged. My muscles relaxed. “I f-forgive you.”

In my last moments of awareness, I had expected the world to fade black, but instead, I experienced a rush of memories. I envisioned the Briar standing over me from months ago, giving me a second chance at life. I remembered following Teddy into Mandala and starting that new life. I thought about my first adventure in Lucity where Samson almost stood against Mal. I relived each and every class with Anberlin. I was brought back to my kiss with Phoebe and the shame in my heart... My fight with Samson and the pain on my cheek... My dance with Aurora... The symposium... The hospital... The fight against Mal... I felt the warmth of a beautiful life, and for once, I was happy. I wanted to live.

But it didn’t matter what I wanted. My consciousness faded...

...

...

...But I didn’t die.

“I love you, Phillip.”

Grandpa’s voice sounded at the edge of my awareness, and his words sparked something inside me. My skin stretched tight and my body tingled. In

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seconds, the hole in my heart closed, the space in my throat cleared, and the numbness in my bones waned. Suddenly, I felt Grandpa's cold fingers resting on the curve of my neck, pressing against the top of my spine.

"What happened?" I asked, rubbing my hands over the closed skin on my chest. "Grandpa?"

There was no response.

"Grandpa?!"

My vision returned. Grandpa was leaning to his side, blood all over. He had wounds on both hands, his face, and now his chest and back. The wounds were growing in all the places I'd sustained them, and moment by moment, I was becoming stronger.

Oh, no.

No, no, no.

A shiver ran through me like a bolt of lightning. The world's greatest empath... he'd...

"Grandpa!" I wrapped my hands around his body and tried to take the wounds back, but blood and tears obscured my vision. I couldn't see him, and without sight, I couldn't heal him. This was it. He'd stolen my death.

"Don't... worry... about... me," Grandpa wheezed.

"Don't die, Grandpa," I begged. "You can't die yet. It should be me. I broke my promise. Let me die for it."

"It's time," he said, touching my cheek. He tried to say something else, but his voice was giving out.

I placed my hand against his and pulled it between us. There, awkwardly, we fumbled through the motions of our secret handshake, ending with a snap. Or rather, I snapped, but Grandpa couldn't muster any force. Instead, his hand fell and dropped to his chest. There, he tensed, and energy swelled around his fingertips. The air sparked like struck flint, and in the middle of his fingers, a pink lotus appeared. He held it up for me to see.

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“This is... the most complete merryweather... I will ever make,” Grandpa said. “My whole life... is being weighed... in these fibers...” Grandpa coughed, and the tips of the flower wilted a moment before returning to form. “Look.” He tilted the lotus forward for me to see. It looked like a normal flower. “I’m at peace.”

“Grandpa...” I brushed my tears again and stole a fraction of a cut from his face, but Grandpa took it back before I could go any further. My whole mind put its effort toward empathizing even a single wound from him, but his mind overpowered mine instantaneously.

“I love you... Phillip,” he said.

“I love you too,” I said.

Grandpa held the merryweather to his chest. His eyes closed, and his body stopped moving. Then, without a mind to sustain his image, he disappeared, fading to nothingness.

In the empty space left behind, the merryweather fluttered to the ground, moving back and forth amid a rush of air. And when the flower touched the ground, it burst apart in a flurry. It was here, beneath a thousand petals—a thousand moments of Grandpa’s life—that I cried.



Chapter 43

All Fear

THE AIR IN MY bedroom was cold, but I lacked the strength to cross the room to the thermostat. Instead, I suffered quietly under my bedsheets. It'd been a full day and night since Grandpa died, and I hadn't slept at all. I'd just stared vacantly at my ceiling and passed the time by waiting for nothing.

Samson and Phoebe banged on my door. They'd been knocking every fifteen minutes for the past three hours. I wanted to tell them to leave me alone, but I couldn't find my voice. My eyes closed to drown them out, and in the emptiness, I tried to remember any amount of happiness I'd felt in the past, but it was all gone, overshadowed by nightmares.

My brain hummed, almost too exhausted to allow for sleep. I rolled to my side and focused on my breath.

In... and out...

Eventually, I found enough comfort for something to happen.



I was running deep in a forest, trying desperately to escape. What I was escaping from, I didn't know, but I was certain I had to run, and for miles I did, avoiding bushes, trees, and rocks as an infinite path unfurled before me.

The thought occurred to me that it might be possible to run so fast that my heart exploded, but in the minutes that came, I learned my legs would give way far before my heart did. A heavy feeling swept through me, and my foot scraped the ground. I tripped, sliding to a stop on the soft dirt. Face down, I

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stayed until my cuts stopped bleeding, and by the time I was ready to move, I no longer felt a desire to run. Instead, I could only find the strength to turn and face the sky.

How much time passed, I wasn't sure, but a stirring beside me stole my focus. Aurora. Silently, she'd appeared and found her way to me. I gave her a nod as she lay down and sat with my feelings until words escaped.

“Grandpa died today.”

Aurora looked over, and her face contorted with empathy. As a gesture, it felt useless now that I knew what empathy could do for things like stab wounds. She reached for my hand, and I let her have it. We pressed our palms together, and she squeezed just hard enough that I wouldn't forget she was there beside me.

“I waited two years for him to wake up,” I said. “I never imagined he'd only have months to live after that. He was the last chance I had for a family, and now that he's gone, I feel so alone.”

“You're not alone,” Aurora said. “The people you love are a part of you. That means your grandfather is still with you if you know where to look.”

Her words spurred something inside me, and I let go of Aurora's hand. My own hands folded over my heart, and in the blank space of my mind, I pictured Grandpa's merryweather—the last one he ever created. Then, I tensed, giving it a little piece of my soul. Suddenly, the petals of a lotus—a regular lotus—popped into existence between my cupped palms. As I spread my fingers apart, it unfurled, and I lay the flower upon my chest. The weight of it pressed against my heart, and it seemed to pull poison from my veins.

My focus turned to the outside world, and I watched a squirrel chitter overhead. Somewhere far away, a pair of birds sang, and their tune was light and airy. The wind rustled the leaves off their branches, and I smelled the crisp scent of lavender coming from the source. All of it put me at ease, and I finally felt safe to let my mind wander. And sure enough, it was quick to find its way

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back to wrath.

Thanatos.

The last moment of Grandpa's life rushed to the forefront of my mind, and my hand tightened into a fist. It didn't even register at first, and then it consumed me. Blood pumped through my veins, and I brushed the lotus away. Grandpa died because Thanatos wanted to live. And now that Thanatos was returning, I was going to be too weak to fight back? No.

If I took Anberlin's training seriously, I could grow stronger. Strong enough to make sure nobody else died. But if I was going to have a chance at success, I needed to learn how to fight—to *really* fight. And for that, I'd need to be fearless.

Yet even the thought of fear brought me fear. How could I overcome it?

I turned to Aurora to ask for her thoughts when a surge of emotion rose in my chest. Adrenaline dumped, and my hands started shaking. I froze, realizing an odd truth. The fear I felt when I thought about Aurora... it was the same fear I'd felt when facing Mal. But with Aurora—all these questions about her... All these doubts... I'd been running from the answers for months, hiding from them. It was time. Time to face my fears and confront my feelings—because facing *any* fear was facing all fear.

“Aurora.” My voice trembled, but I caught it. “Can I tell you something?”

“Sure.” She leaned over and scooped the lotus from the ground. Gently, she placed it back atop my chest.

I swallowed hard and forced words through the lump in my throat. “I like you. I *like* you, like you. And... I've been afraid to tell you because I didn't know if you were real. But I *know* you. You're incredible. If you like me too, then maybe we can be more than friends.”

It was awkward and clunky, but deep relief spread through my soul anyway. Acceptance or rejection didn't matter—only truth did. I looked away and rested with the feeling.

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Suddenly, warmth spread over me as Aurora pressed against me. A soft hand brushed my far cheek, and she brought herself in to kiss the one closer to her. It was soft, gentle, and quick. Euphoria swept through, and my mind blanked. For a moment—just a moment—I was taken directly to the present where nothing else existed but this kiss. And in that one microsecond, I felt pure serenity.



When I opened my eyes again, everything was gone. I was back in my room, staring at the ceiling, trying to manage a million cascading emotions.

Chapter 44

The Phantom

MY HAND MOVED TO my cheek, and I could almost feel her lips still pressed against it. But, as my emotions settled in the cold, dark room—the abject reality that no longer had Grandpa in it—just one feeling bubbled to the surface.

Resolve.

I was going to kill Thanatos.

Knock, knock.

Ready to confront the world, I rolled out of bed, stiff from the hours of withering away. My legs hobbled to the door, and I opened it, expecting to find Samson and Phoebe in the hallway. They were there, of course, but they were standing behind Anberlin. He looked stoic, if not pensive, and he stared at me with heightened intensity.

“Teddy wants to have a meeting in the Situation Room,” Anberlin said.

My eyes drifted to my friends. “In a second.”

I approached Samson and Phoebe with my head held low. They each reached for a hug, and I held them close. As I pulled away, Samson gave a reassuring nod while Phoebe smiled halfway through tears. This was all we had to exchange. My gaze drifted back toward Anberlin. Wordlessly, he stepped off toward the elevator. I followed.

My eyes lingered on his heels as we walked. My mind was ablaze; if I didn’t control my thoughts now, they’d burn me to ash. Luckily, as the doors opened and we stepped into the elevator, I found myself in a box with the only person who could help.

“Anberlin?”

He gave me a hard look. “Yes?”

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“Do you think we can meditate after the meeting?”

He softened and released a breath. “Of course, Phillip.”

We rode the rest of the way in silence, and the elevator doors opened to a nearly empty room. The greenish glow of the central tank filtered through each corner of the room, and the rows of empty beds cast long shadows across the walls. Only Teddy was present, and I found his peaceful sleep ironic.

“Alright, let’s get to business,” Anberlin said, finding a bed near Teddy. “The secrecy surrounding the Situation Room is *very* serious. By law, you are not allowed to speak about what happens over the course of the next hour. Do you understand?”

I nodded and lay on a nearby cot.

“Good. Fall asleep and I’ll meet you on the other side.”



Somehow, I beat Anberlin to the dream and stood alone at the edge of the city. Or, well, almost alone.

Phillip, the voice of Lucity sprang in my head. ***Are you okay?***

“Not now,” I whispered.

But—

Anberlin appeared, took a quick look around, and headed toward the inner part of the city.

We took a familiar path, and I recognized the downtrodden buildings and half-broken neon signs that skirted the area where Teddy and Dr. Delphi had been fighting.

Then, we went deeper, moving far into the city before arriving at a nondescript single-story office building. It was inconspicuous in every way, a

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perfect camouflage. The front door was heavy, and the lobby was just as uninteresting as the façade. Anberlin led me down the room to a dirty lift shaft. It looked rusted and broken, but when Anberlin pressed the call button, the doors opened with a smooth glide.

We stepped in, and Anberlin hammered away at the panel, entering a code by tapping a sequence of floor buttons. Suddenly, the lift lurched and began a slow descent.

Are you in trouble?

I ignored Lucy. The trip underground was short, and the doors opened to a new room. It was like a spaceship down here, full of aluminum walls and shiny tiles. The hallway was bright, well-lit, and clean. Anberlin stepped forward, guiding me toward a specific room.

“Ocular identification required,” a panel declared, springing alive as we passed it.

Anberlin pressed his face against the scanner.

“Thank you, Anberlin Young,” the mechanical voice said.

There was a loud *click* as the door swung open, and the Situation Room was exposed in all its glory. It had the presence of the Oval Office mixed with a villain’s lair, complete with a large circular desk in the middle of the room. Teddy was already inside, and he stood as I entered. His only greeting was a subtle nod.

“Have a seat,” Teddy said, gesturing toward a set of open chairs.

I took a seat on the far side of the table. Anberlin sat between us, withdrawing a pencil and a pad of paper. He hunched over the table and waited for the conversation to start.

“Alright,” Teddy started. “Let’s get to it. The doctors said your grandfather died of a heart attack, but we know Dr. Delphi was arrested at the scene. So, what happened last night?”

“Grandpa—” I choked down my emotions while trying to match the

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professional composure of Anberlin. “Grandpa was murdered. But it wasn’t Dr. Delphi who killed him. I mean—she *attempted* to kill him, but she wasn’t successful.”

“Then who—”

“Mal.”

There was a tense pause in the room. Teddy’s face contorted. Anberlin straightened.

“Okay,” Teddy said, organizing his thoughts. “That’s a lot. Let’s start with Dr. Delphi. What was she doing there?”

I told them what I knew, including how I walked in on her halfway through the murder attempt, how she confessed to the murder, and how she was arrested. There were several parts I stumbled over, and many more I forced myself to speak.

“And... the last thing she told me was... Thanatos was returning.” Tension filled the room, making the air heavy and hard to breathe.

Teddy placed a hand on his forehead.

“So, Dr. Delphi *was* working with the Night Corps?” he asked.

“I don’t think so,” I said, disbelieving my own words. “It’s hard to explain, but Mal and Grandpa *both* confirmed that Dr. Delphi wasn’t helping them.”

“They must be mistaken,” Teddy said. He looked to Anberlin for support. “If Dr. Delphi wants Thanatos to return, then she’s a traitor. And if she’s a traitor, she’s the mole. Case closed, right?”

I opened my mouth to refute his claim, but Anberlin spoke first. “We’ll leave the case open and come back to it,” he said. “If Henry says it’s not her, I believe him.”

“Henry’s too—” Teddy said.

Anberlin held up a hand, and Teddy relented.

“You mentioned Mal killed Henry?” Anberlin said. “Can you tell us about that?”

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I found this story much harder to push through, and I glossed over the details of the promise I made to Grandpa. If I admitted that out loud, I'd be skewered by guilt. In fact, I pushed myself quickly toward Grandpa's empathic death, finding myself wholly unprepared to withhold my emotions for such a conversation. As I finished, Anberlin closed his eyes. Very distinctly, I heard him take a deep breath in and out. When his eyes opened again, his peace was renewed.

"So, what did Mal want in all of this?"

"She wanted to know Grandpa's secret to awakening," I said. "She wants to use it to bring back Thanatos."

"And?" Teddy asked. "What *is* the secret?"

"It was a bit over my head." I explained what Grandpa said about achieving temporary serenity, going deeper into your mind, and killing a part of your psyche. When I finished, I turned to Anberlin. "Does this make sense to you?"

"It does," he said. "We often think of ourselves as a singular being, but spiritually, the self is comprised of a collection of lesser beings. Theoretically, if you killed one of those lesser beings, you could wake from a meditative coma. That's the thesis, anyway."

"Okay," Teddy said. "So that's it, then? Thanatos is coming back?"

The room remained silent.

Is he really? Lucity overrode my thoughts again. His vibrant tone took me off guard, and it became harder to ignore him. What was he doing here, anyway? This was private; why won't he go away?

"Phillip..." Teddy shook his head. "We'll make sure Ursula pays for what she's done. She'll be court martialed for the attempted murder and espionage with the maximum penalty being death. Then, we'll go after Mal—"

"Wait." I held up both my hands. "Dr. Delphi should be tried for the murder of Grandpa, sure, but—" I paused as a rush of emotion caught in my

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throat. Drawing a deep breath, I quelled its rise and swallowed it back down. “But she shouldn’t be executed. She wasn’t the mole.”

“No, you said that, but—she tried to kill Henry. She must be *something* to the Night Corps. Besides, there’s nobody else it could be. Ursula’s known about every happenstance in our facility for well over a decade.”

“Yeahhh,” Anberlin said, introducing skepticism. “But we didn’t start having problems until two years ago. So, why would she suddenly change sides *after* Thanatos entered that coma?”

“Nobody else is a possible suspect,” Teddy said. “It can’t even be me—the mole knows more than I do. Whoever the mole is, they’d need to learn the information in our private records without ever physically accessing them. They’d need to listen in on every Situation Room conversation without ever being detected. They’d need to know the content and context of multiple conversations that took place simultaneously. It’s either Dr. Delphi snooping through our files with her library, or... or...”

“Or a phantom?” I suggested. “One who could be in multiple conversations at the same time?”

Teddy looked at me like I was dumb, but Anberlin gave me a curious look. “I know who the mole is.”

My whole body tensed. Every corner, every conversation, every file—there was only one person who had access to it all. They’d been devious, cozying up as a friend. They’d been cunning, finding clever ways to get me talking about Grandpa and his location. And they’d been quiet, slinking around in the background, hearing, seeing, and sensing everything.

‘Don’t tell anyone about me.’

‘Maybe you can visit your grandpa.’

‘Do you know where he is?’

I looked up to the sky and debated whether to say it out loud, but amid Teddy’s expectant look, I knew I had no choice.

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“It’s Lucy.”

Chapter 45

A Useful Idiot

“LUCITY?” TEDDY SCOFFED. “LUCITY is just the name of this place.”

“No. Lucy’s alive. He’s been talking to me for months.”

“That’s impossible,” Teddy said. “Simon lost his cognition when he—”

“Simon?” I straightened. “That’s who you used to create Lucy? The traitor? The one my dad killed two years ago?”

“Yes, but—”

“Stop. Let me get this straight. You made the place where you store your more dire secrets out of *a traitor*? And you didn’t expect it would cause you any *problems*?”

“Well, he’s braindead, so—”

“Are you sure about that?”

“I am.” Teddy looked at Anberlin and frowned. “I think I am.”

“Let’s tell Phillip the full story,” Anberlin said. “And then consider what he’s suggesting.”

“Fine.” Teddy faced me. “Two years ago, on a mission, Simon drove Anberlin away from a mission and tried to kill him. Thinking fast, Anberlin pulled him into a dream. While there, your father—in the real world—put a bullet through Simon’s head. But that didn’t kill him. What it did was lesioned out the part of his brain that would allow for him to wake up. This forced him to stay in that dream forever. And with his brain producing endless alpha waves, Anberlin was stuck with him.

“Rather than risk Anberlin’s life by killing Simon outright, we had a team of doctors prepare a temporary solution—the tank in Level Two. And by keeping the brain alive, Anberlin was given enough time to construct the Exit Pad.

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“And then something interesting happened. Simon tried to use the Exit Pad behind Anberlin, but his body had already been harvested. With no physical form for him to return to, the act destroyed his consciousness.” Teddy leaned forward. “But if what you’re saying is true, maybe he only lost his body that night. Maybe—just maybe—his consciousness inherited the world itself.”

“Teddy, if this is true,” Anberlin stated plainly, “then Simon has been able to hear everything we’ve ever done in Level Two. It means we’ve been spoon-feeding our plans to the Night Corps for two years.”

“If,” Teddy said. “But there’s another problem. At the end of the day, this is still a secure server. So even if Simon knows everything about everyone, he can’t escape to talk. How would he get information out to the Night Corps? Do you think he’s working with someone else in Mandala? Could Lucy and Ursula be working together?”

We all pondered his question, and a half-formed thought tickled my brain.

“What if Simon’s not getting information out?” I suggested. “What if someone else has been coming in?”

Teddy tilted his head.

I looked at the ceiling, fumbling through my idea in real time. “What if someone like Mal was using astral projection to get into Level Two? In doing so, she could enter this place from a mile away.”

“We literally just figured out how to do that,” Teddy said.

“Maybe you’re behind the curve,” I said. “I mean, how else did she get her crew into the symposium?”

Teddy pursed his lips. “Alright. But if Mal *was* slinking around Lucy, then someone would’ve recognized her, right?”

“Not if she were cloaked in a shadow,” I countered. “Or disguising herself as a bird.”

“A shadow?”

“A bird?”

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“She can transform her appearance,” I said, slack-jawed. “You guys didn’t know that? When she first attacked me, she came to me as a shadow—no color to her body. And when she killed Grandpa, she transformed into a raven to fly away.”

Teddy and Anberlin paled.

“Alright, so she can change into animals and stuff, whatever,” Teddy waved his hand as though it’d make the thought go away. “There’s still one more problem. Mal came to the symposium looking for Henry—but he wasn’t there. That was misinformation I fed to Ursula to test if she was the mole. Under your theory, I can see that Simon overheard that conversation and told Mal to come to the symposium, fine. But then, the very next day, we filled the walls with deuterium. This should’ve prevented Mal from finding Henry at the hospital—but it didn’t. How?”

“What if someone was talking about Henry’s hiding spot while the Symposium was still happening?” Anberlin suggested. “With all the visitors present, maybe one of them knew where he was?”

“No, that’s not it.” My heart sank. I knew exactly how that information got out. “Mal never left. She stayed in Lucy after the attack knowing there’d be meetings about it.”

“And? Who gave up Henry’s location?” Teddy asked.

I swallowed hard. “Phoebe did. She met me here and told me where to find him. It was a dream she had and... and it’s not her fault—she was trying to help me. But... Lucy must’ve told Mal.”

In the silence, two pieces of the puzzle connected.

“Actually, I know that’s how it happened. On my way to the Exit Pad, I heard a bird following me. I didn’t think twice about it then, but...” I scoffed at how obvious it’d been. “Have either of you ever seen another animal in Lucy? A wolf? A spider? An ant? The only animal ever has been a bird, right?”

There was no answer.

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“Right?”

They nodded slowly.

“Well, that’s Mal,” I said, throwing up my hands and leaning back. “It’s always been Mal.”

Teddy cursed, finally accepting the truth.

So, you’ve finally caught me.

Anberlin and Teddy jumped, almost leaping from their chairs. By their reaction, I deduced that Lucy was talking to all three of us at once.

“Simon?” Anberlin said, looking up to the sky.

“I trusted you!” I shouted.

Lucy laughed, and it rattled my brain.

You were a useful idiot, Phillip, but I don’t have to pretend to be your friend anymore. Your grandfather is dead, Mal will never return here for more information, and Thanatos is returning. My mission is complete.

“Why did you do it?” Anberlin asked. “You had nothing to gain in betraying us. No money, no power, no prestige. Why endure?”

Lucy laughed, and I heard the echoes of it bouncing around my skull, even as I held my hands over my ears.

You wouldn’t understand. Mandala stands for nothing—believes in nothing. But among the Night Corps, I’m a true believer. Thanatos will be humanity’s savior. He will cleanse the worst of us, and humankind will prosper.

Anberlin’s lips pursed and his eyes darkened. He stood and we followed suit, expecting him to move toward the hall. But Anberlin’s fingers curled around the lip of the table, and as I blinked, it was gone, sent flying into the far wall. The table smashed and splintered into a thousand pieces. Anberlin took a heavy breath as the debris settled. Then: “Let’s go.”

Together, we retreated to the lift. As it ascended, I raced through a million thoughts. I worried for Phoebe as it was clear she didn’t report her dream

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about Grandpa. I despised Lucity and his betrayal. I hated myself for wishing him dead. It felt like a thousand years had passed since I'd stood at the front of the retail store and watched thieves rush through the doors. If I were still living that path, I wouldn't be having these thoughts. This new path was pushing me to new limits—but at what cost?

The lift stopped. Teddy opened his mouth to speak, but Anberlin shook his head. In the background, Lucity chattered on and on.

...The world is an orchestra. If you cut the worst players, the orchestra gets better. It's that simple. This is what...

None of us listened to his impromptu sermon. Our feet shuffled toward the Exit Pad, and I felt small behind the two grown men. I felt foolish. I should've told people about the voice; it would've prevented so much harm. Instead, I'd listened blindly to an imaginary voice and asked no questions. What was wrong with me?

Soon, we were staring down the Exit Pad, lining up to use it. Teddy was first.

Ah, I've looked forward to this day. The day of salvation. Thanatos will come for you first, Teddy, and there is nothing you can do to survive.

Teddy didn't react. He just disappeared behind the monochromatic door and escaped out into the real world.

And you, Anberlin. Your fate has always been written in blood. I've seen the secret prophecies. Would you like to tell me how you die?

Anberlin smiled, authentic and wide. Wordlessly, he stepped into the Exit Pad and disappeared.

For the first time since I'd arrived at Mandala, Lucity was empty. My eyes drifted over the work that'd been poured into the place, and I felt lucky to be the last to admire it. From here, I could see it all—castles, parks, cities, and the half-collapsed pyramid, which now looked like a relic of an long-forgotten ancient world. I'd almost lost Samson there; he might've lost his father. This

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war was going to be bigger than me, and I needed to be ready.

I took a heavy step across a silent world.

And you, Phillip. You can sleep soundly. Thanatos won't come for you.

Why squash an ant when you're a god?

“That’ll be his mistake,” I said. “Right now, I’m the weakest I’ll ever be. The worst iteration of myself that’ll ever exist. But I’ll put in the work. I’ll fight. And when we meet, we’ll see who’s stronger.”

You couldn't even stop me. What makes you think you'll stop the greatest coalescent who ever lived?

“In just a few minutes, you’re going to die,” I said, approaching the podium with the big red button. “But I’ll keep living, and so long as I’m not dead, I’m not finished. But you?”

My hand slammed the button. Static electricity whirled around me, and a wave of lightning stimulated my brain.

“You’re done.”



Anberlin was standing at the vat. Green light reflected off him, giving texture to the sweat on his face. Gently, he dug his nail under a lip in the metal and lifted the plate. Beneath the slab was a small keyboard. Anberlin typed a code, and the fluid in the case drained. I watched as Simon’s brain twitched, and then—nothing. Lucy was dead. In moments, the green light flickered away, and we were left in relative darkness.

“Goddamnit, Simon,” Anberlin whispered. “You could’ve been the best of us.”

“I—” Teddy paused, and his voice wavered. “This Lucy thing is going

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to cause a lot of fallout. There'll be months of trials, and at the end of it, I'll be put in jail. That's... That's not where I'd be the most helpful."

Anberlin said nothing.

"Maybe I can do some good on my way out." Teddy drew a deep breath and nodded to himself. "Maybe I'll fight back. Who knows—maybe I'll win." Teddy chuckled.

"What if you do?" Anberlin said tepidly.

"What if I do..." Teddy faced Anberlin. "You should resign while there's still time to enjoy life, my old friend. Just say the word and I can approve your retirement package before I go."

"I'm staying to fight with or without you," Anberlin said.

"You'll die, you know," Teddy said, his voice dark.

"We'll all die," Anberlin said. "That's how this life thing works."

Teddy nodded, his lips curling with sorrow. Slowly, he leaned forward and wrapped his arms around Anberlin. The hug was returned half-heartedly as Anberlin put one arm around Teddy's back.

"Phillip." Teddy stepped back and turned toward me. "Now's your chance to run, you know."

His words cut through me. He was right—in the instability of his departure, I'd be able to slip away unnoticed. Amid the transfer of power, it was unlikely anyone would come after me. But as I looked at Anberlin, I knew where I needed to be. I needed to be here, growing stronger—not just to right the wrongs I'd made, but to create new rights along the way. He was the one who'd get me there.

"I'm staying too," I said.

Teddy nodded and smiled toothlessly. With a casual salute, he took a step back.

"Godspeed."

Anberlin returned the gesture with two fingers. A moment later,

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Theodore Wilson, the Director of Operations at Mandala, was gone forever.

Chapter 46

Shadow Work

With Teddy's departure, it took a minute for the elevator to return to our level. As we waited, I took a final look at the lifeless mass that had once been Lucy. A part of me wanted to break the glass and spit on it, but another part of me was deep in mourning. I had thought of Lucy as a friend, and it hurt to know he never considered me the same.

The elevator doors opened and then closed behind us, whirring to life.

"Teddy won't win, you know," Anberlin said.

I looked up at Anberlin, seeing him in a new light. I'd never seen him despair before.

"Why's the board going to imprison him?" I asked. "Can't we make a case for him to be acquitted?"

"Businessmen only care about the bottom line," Anberlin said. "His actions in the last year have led to the deaths of dozens of well-trained coalescents—all of whom we've spent millions to train—and the catastrophe at the symposium was an international embarrassment. To make matters worse, Dr. Delphi was wrongfully driven from the library. When that comes out, they'll blame him for that, too. Teddy's right about the consequences, but..." Anberlin shook his head. "Look, I noticed you were the last to wake from Lucy. Did you share any last words?"

"I told him I was going to kill Thanatos," I said.

"How far are you willing to go to do that?"

"I'll go as far as it takes."

Anberlin searched me for sincerity. I stared at him with fire.

"Good." We arrived at the top floor of Level One. "When do you want

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to start?”

“Now.”

Anberlin nodded and stepped off toward his room. “Meditation will be at the core of your training. I need you to steel yourself now. This won’t be easy, and it won’t be quick. You’ll need to trust the process, even when things don’t seem to be working. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” I paused. “Are you afraid of Thanatos like everyone else?”

“Deathly,” Anberlin admitted freely. “When people say he’s the strongest coalescent to ever live, they’re understating the matter. He’s *magnitudes* stronger than the rest of us.”

“What does he want?” I asked.

“The same thing all holy warriors want,” Anberlin said, fumbling with the lock on his door. “To fix the world by murdering everything they believe to be wrong with it.”

The door creaked open and, once inside, Anberlin moved to the stove. A pair of mats lay on the floor, and I sat atop one. I didn’t need to be told what to do next. I closed my eyes and breathed, working to tune out Anberlin setting up a kettle.

Breathe in... Breathe out...

“Good. Just focus.”

Minutes passed and my mind raced. In the past day, I made amends with Samson and Phoebe, watched my grandfather die, learned my friend was a traitor, and told Aurora I liked her. It was a lot to process. In fact, it was so much to process that, paradoxically, my mind shut down. It’d become so overwhelmed that it yearned for silence.

I wasn’t expecting much, but suddenly, I had no thoughts, feelings, or emotions. My mind was empty, like the space between stars or the universe before time. I simply had breath...

The seconds ticked, and images flashed through my mind. They started as

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blurry reflections, but they eventually sharpened and came into focus. Anberlin's office fell away, and a new land unveiled itself.



There was one tree, then many, then a forest. Creatures moved around me, and I listened as they stepped over twigs and moved past brush. I turned to escape, but I couldn't see in any direction. I was trapped.

“Phillip?” an eerie voice called out to me. I recognized it.

“Grandpa?”

I turned toward the source, finding a shadow between two large trees. As I took a step toward it, the shadow of Grandpa took a step back.

“You promised,” Grandpa said. “You promised you'd stay awake.”

As the last word left his mouth, a blade shot through his back. Grandpa tightened, then fell to the ground. Behind him—holding the knife—was a shade of myself. I stared down the pitch-black doppelganger and felt the beast's soul staring back at me. Then, both mirages dusted away, melting into the shadows, joining the rest of the darkness surrounding me.

Not a moment later, a set of eyes opened from where they'd disappeared, and a new darkness was pulled from the earth. A beast the size of a bus stood on its back legs. When it reached its full height, over three times my size, it leaned forward on its knuckles and roared. The ground rumbled, and I was thrown off balance.

This was it—my chance to face my guilt. I steadied myself, but a flurry of voices spoke all at once in my head. They intruded upon my thoughts like Lucy had, but they were speaking with my own inflection.

You broke your promise, it said. You deserve this torment.

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You're to blame for Thanatos's return, it said. You deserve this pain.

You'll never be strong enough, it said. You deserve this death.

They were right. I held my hands to my head and dropped to my knees. A pitch-black shadow descended upon me, and all I could do was press fingers into my temples. Then—

“Ungh—”

The beast swatted me with a hand the size of my torso, and I was sent flailing through the forest. My back slammed against the trunk of a tree, and I slumped over to the ground. The beast launched itself toward my broken body and began a violent onslaught, slamming its fists into my head over and over. Then, it picked me up and spread its arms, trying to pull my limbs from my core. As I strained to stay in one piece, I relived the events of Grandpa's death. I saw the knife in my back. I saw his empathy steal my death. I saw the merryweather burst. By the end of the monster's assault, I was little more than a husk of myself, and I just wanted to die.

Then, I did.



I screamed. The pain and despair dissipated quickly, but the dark cloud polluting my mind hung over me for much, much longer. I sobbed for minutes. Anberlin said nothing. He simply rose from his seat and removed the kettle from the burner.

“What *was* that?” I asked, staring down a puddle I'd created.

“That,” Anberlin said, pouring a cup of tea, “was your first ego death. The beast was the manifestation of your feelings, a monster buried deep inside you.”

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“How do I deal with it?”

“The answer is different for every beast,” Anberlin said, handing me the mug. “But shadow work is a very important part of your spiritual growth. If that’s the first monster you’ve come across, then you’re dealing with surface-level feelings. There’s more underneath, and until you deal with it, those feelings will always be there, guiding your actions in subconscious ways. But this isn’t a quick process—you’ll likely spend the rest of your life rooting out these emotions from your mind.”

I wiped the sweat off my brow. “I don’t want to feel like that ever again.”

“You will, though.” Anberlin gave me a serious look. “You might have to face that beast a million times, and each time, the pain will be the same. Once you’re deep in your training, you won’t be able to go back to the way things were. You can’t un-understand something, after all. So, are you sure this is your path? Are you sure you’re ready to see this through?”

I looked down into my tea and noticed ripples shaking across the surface. But there was only one answer I could give. “I’ll do whatever it takes.”

“Good,” Anberlin said. “Then, close your eyes, take a breath, and let’s begin again.”

EPILOGUE

TEDDY WASN'T IMPRESSED BY the state of his hotel. It was one of those shabby discount inns that accepted cash rather than a fancy government-expensed resort. But his discontent was meaningless against what Teddy knew.

He's coming.

The full moon rose high in the sky, and light filtered in through the drapes like a candle. It was time to face the inevitable. Teddy moved to the bathroom where he saw himself in the mirror.

I look like shit.

Sunken lines had dug into his forehead, dark bags had formed beneath his eyes, and deep wrinkles pulled at the corners of his eyes. It'd been three nights since his last slumber, and he was running out of strength. Soon, it'd be time for him to face his greatest fear.

Thanatos.

Teddy sighed and picked up a travel-sized toothbrush. He moved it over the sink, but his shaking fingers were in no shape to hold anything, and he dropped it. The brush fell into the basin with a horrific *clink-clink-clink*, and he stopped himself from retrieving it. Brushing teeth was for people who planned to keep living. Tonight, he was not among those people.

Instead, he shuffled back to the bedroom and lay in bed. All his clothes stayed on—a small courtesy to the attendant who would find his corpse in the morning—and he pulled the bedsheets high over his body. Beside him, he turned on a small nightlight. This was an old superstition, but he was willing to try anything that would help him survive. Nothing would work, of course, but only a fool would turn down a chance to live, no matter the odds.

An hour passed and, as exhausted as he was, Teddy still couldn't surrender

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to sleep. Resigned to the inevitable, he leaned to the bedside table and pulled a mela inhaler from the drawer. He stared at it with despair before holding it up to his mouth. His finger hovered over the tip as though it were a loaded gun, and for all intents and purposes, it was. Knowing this, he pulled the trigger anyway.



Teddy appeared in the middle of an infinite road. The sun beat down upon the sand lining a deserted highway. There was nothing around for miles—nothing except the death that’d been stalking him.

“Thanatos,” Teddy said. He held out his hand, and a stiff drink appeared in his grip. “Are you here to kill me?”

Thanatos was wearing his black robes with a hood placed high over his head. “I am.” His voice was deep and loud. “I know that if I don’t kill you tonight, you’ll use every resource at your disposal to stand in my way. I’m trying to save the world, and that means I must make sacrifices.”

“Save the world?” Teddy took a sip of his drink. “You’re going to kill thousands.”

“You’re underestimating me. There are more than a few thousand who need to be purged.”

“Why don’t you work on saving those people instead?” Teddy asked. “People can change. I don’t know why you can’t believe in humanity.”

Thanatos chuckled. “You know, we’re more alike than you’d admit. We both make sacrifices to secure a better future for humanity. The only difference is that you lack my vision.”

Teddy took another long sip.

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“You’re not a weak person, Theodore.” Thanatos extended a hand. “The doors of the Night Corps are open to the strong. Join me. Find faith in my mission. Save the world.”

For a moment, the offer weighed heavily on Teddy. But a flash of Anberlin swept through his mind, and he waved the thought away. “You were right the first time. If you don’t kill me, I *will* stand in your way.”

“Very well,” Thanatos said, lowering his arm. “I want you to know that your death will pain me.”

With a flash, a gun appeared in the air, and Teddy snatched it before gravity could pull it away. His finger rocked against the trigger, and a dozen shots were fired. The gunshots echoed for miles, and then—silence.

A stiff breeze swept between the two men, and when the smoke dissipated, Thanatos remained standing, unharmed. The bullets had bounced harmlessly off his skin.

“You’re just like Hubert,” Thanatos said, repairing the fabric of his cloak by smoothing over the holes with his fingers.

Teddy smiled and dropped the gun. The rim of his drink pressed to his lips once more, and he downed the rest of his glass. Ice *clanked* against the bottom, and Teddy straightened.

“You’ve grown stronger,” Teddy said.

“That coma was the best thing to ever happen to me,” Thanatos said. “A thousand years of meditation has given me a lot of time to grow. I feel sorry for your friends. They won’t stand a chance.”

“I believe in them,” Teddy said.

“I’m glad you will die with hope,” Thanatos said. He opened his hand, and a gun appeared in his palm. “Had you lived much longer, you’d have died without it.”

“My hope will never die,” Teddy said. “Not even as I do.”

Thanatos nodded and lifted his hand. He pulled the trigger once, sending

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a single bullet screaming through the air. Teddy blinked, and a chunk of lead tore through his forehead, bursting out the back like a bomb. For just a single second, Teddy remained standing—and then he disappeared. The cup he was holding fell to the ground, and the glass shattered, sending shards in all directions. In seconds, the ice melted. In minutes, it evaporated. And thus, the last of Theodore Wilson was erased from the world.

Author's Note:

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